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# Reflections On Leaking Men And Abject Masculinities: Challenging Representations Of Male Identity In And Through Body-Based Performance Art

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**REFLECTIONS ON LEAKING MEN AND ABJECT MASCULINITIES:  
CHALLENGING REPRESENTATIONS OF MALE IDENTITY IN AND  
THROUGH BODY-BASED PERFORMANCE ART**

by

**Mark Andrew Flisher**

A thesis submitted to Plymouth University in partial fulfillment for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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## ***AUTHOR'S DECLARATION***

*At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Sub-Committee.*

*Work submitted for this research degree at Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.*

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## **Abstract**

Towards the end of the last century discussions on the representation of masculinity in male body-based performance art placed emphasis on the deconstruction of normative masculine identities. The focus of these investigations tended to position the image of masculinity within Lacan's sexuation matrix, and as such, these representations were usually referred to as being phallic. That is, they reinscribed the behaviours, traits and characteristics of normative masculinity into the performance space. The central thrust of this practice-as-research thesis is that while some male artists deconstruct the performance of phallic masculinity, to challenge normative masculine ideologies, they often first reinscribe normativity onto their bodies. I argue that, while achieving a destabilisation, this approach does not take into consideration the multiplicity of masculine identities that emerge through the individual lived experiences of masculinity

This thesis proposes that the performance of my personal experiences of having a masculine identity, and the exploration of these through my male body, might offer an alternative challenge to normative masculinity. Deriving from performance practices that I refer to as 'muscular masculinity' consideration is given to how I might make space in my work to encourage a focus on the sensorial qualities of having a masculine identity. I mean this in relation to, for example, the feelings of emotions such as shame, anxiety, and vulnerability that emerge as a result of challenging my own identity, and also the different corporeal pleasures I experience as a result of having a male body. In this thesis, I refer to the practice of attending to these sensorial qualities and the gaps that emerge through an intersubjective exchange in performance, as generosity. Furthermore, I argue that generosity can challenge normative representations of masculinity because it requires the male artist to struggle; to struggle with the incoherence of their identity, to struggle with their body, and to struggle with the insecurity of meaning making.

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## Introduction

In her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998), Amelia Jones links performative trace strategies used by body artists from the 1960s to the 1990s, back to the American painter Jackson Pollock. While this assertion supports her wider agenda of locating body art within the lineage of a fine art tradition, as her other texts suggest (1994; 2006b), it also locates Pollock at the margins of modernist and postmodernist aesthetics (Jones, 1998: 66–67). However, this is not the only place of ambiguity that Pollock can be seen to reside in. As his work became more celebrated during the 1950s the photographed images of Jackson Pollock became more frequently circulated in mainstream media. Seemingly portrayed as the epitome of masculinity, in hindsight, and upon the backdrop of wider socio-political contexts, these photographs also make explicit a cultural anxiety based upon the representation of men and their role in society. As with his paintings, I propose that the way that Pollock's masculine identity is portrayed in those photographs can be considered a trope that is present in male body art from the 1960s to the end of the Twentieth Century. Moreover, this thesis also argues that the destabilisation of normative masculinity in these works is not without its problems.

At a swift glance, one might be mistaken in assuming that the photograph of Jackson Pollock in *Life Magazine*, published in 1949, suggests a flawless achievement of the blueprints associated with masculinity at that time. Between the image and a strapline that asks whether 'Jackson Pollock is the boldest living artist in the United States' he stands leaning against his most

extensive work, *#9*, an 18-foot long action painting (Anon, 1949: 42). His paint-splattered blue overalls and black work boots reference the values of hard work and utility, and his folded bulky arms not only emphasise his muscularity but might also act as a metaphor for the autonomy culturally associated with masculinity. The photographer Hans Namuth also portrayed a similar image in his photographic depictions of Jackson Pollock, but unlike that of Life Magazine, his images also captured the moment of creation. In Namuth's photographs not only is Pollock portrayed as strong and autonomous, but he is also depicted leaning across large canvasses laid on the floor while dribbling house paint from trowels or sticks on to his passive surfaces (Jones, 1998: 64).

The image of masculinity that Pollock represents in those photographs is the same image that is associated with warriors and heroes, and as Ralph Donald notes, the warrior image goes hand in hand with becoming a man in many cultures (Donald, 2002: 172). It is for this reason that Western armies in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century have played up to this image as a way of grabbing the attention of prospective recruits. In an American recruitment poster for World War I, a tagline reads 'The United States Army *builds* MEN (Paus, 1919 Original Emphasis). Below that are three painted generic images of powerful looking men standing under the headings "character", "craft", and "physique". It is images like this, and those photographs of Jackson Pollock, that allows society to set standards for men in relation to how they should act, behave, and how they look. If those standards are adhered to some men are privileged, but those who fall short of them are discredited (Connell, 2005: 214).

It was on the back of this discourse that so many young American men were forced to conscript into the horrors of World War II, and in doing so, many



holes were left unfilled in the American workforce back at home. Significantly, these gaps were soon filled by women who took on roles in factories and running industries that had been traditionally defined for men. In 1943 Norman Rockwell captured this moment in history when his painting of *Rosie the Riveter* was published on the front cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* (Rockwell, 1943). The painting of a factory woman on her lunch break, with her rivet gun on her lap, her foot on Adolf Hitler's manifesto *Mein Kampf*, and with the American flag as her backdrop became one of the iconic images of that time.

What I find striking about this painting though is the way that Rockwell inscribes onto Rosie's body masculine traits and characteristics. Like Pollock, Rosie dons blue overalls, her arms are bulky, her face is stern, sweaty and greasy from her work, and she's looking off to the left, disinterested in her potential audience's gaze. What is more, the gaps that Rosie fills are not just in the workforce, but also in the social roles assigned to men at that time. She is physically strong, independent, she is not scared of hard work, and she is the breadwinner. Those gaps that need filling are also metaphorical; that rivet gun lying across her groin looks suspiciously like a penis. Deep in thought, she appears to be calm and in control at a time of much upheaval.

Rockwell had painted Rosie as a temporary replacement for male masculinity, the dainty white hanky that sticks out of her pocket reveals a feminine past, which can be returned to after the war (Denny, 2012). Yet, by presenting masculinity as being temporarily displaced onto the female body, Rockwell inadvertently paints Rosie as also demonstrating that normative masculine ideologies can be dislodged from the male body. Against a backdrop of extreme violence, where in war men became heroes, Rosie's reference

towards a normative male identity was ignored, but once these men started to return home, the female performance of masculinity inevitably became a patriarchal problem. Four years after the war, at the cusp of two decades, attention was drawn towards the potential feminisation of American men (Jones, 1998: 78). The anxiety around male identities emerged because of the general sense that urban life was softening men, partly because of the continued emphasis placed on consumption (Hollows, 2002). However, a concern also became manifest in the observation that the American male was beginning to be perceived as weak in relation to both his ability to enforce discipline and the growing influence of motherhood in the household. The latter became a particular problem for American society as this new relationship between mothers and their sons was seen to usurp the importance of paternal guidance for young men (Gilbert, 2005: 62).

Considering this socio-political context, the circulation of photographic depictions of Jackson Pollock might be seen as a cultural strategy to reinforce the traits, behaviours and characteristics of normative masculinity onto the body of the male. In doing so, however, the same action also signifies the anxiety of the male subject in American society of that time, for to repeatedly emphasise this type of masculinity makes explicit a cultural recognition that there is no guarantee that the male body can meet that particular masculine identity. As such, what becomes apparent is that characteristics, traits and behaviours such as strength, independence and control, do not have to be the sole domain of the male (Jones, 1998: 78). Thus, I argue that the photographed images of Pollock and Rockwell's painting of *Rosie the Riveter*, when read alongside each other, have the potential to reveal masculinity as being a social construct.

## **Thesis Aims and Questions**

As a starting point, this thesis identifies artists who, in a similar manner to those photographs of Jackson Pollock discussed above, capture a cultural anxiety based upon the male body and its inability to achieve the hegemonic ideals associated with masculinity. Unlike the photographs of Pollock, I focus on how these artists restore masculinity into their performances space as a way of undermining normative gendered identities. My argument is that the strategies employed by these artists can be seen to challenge the ideological representation of masculinity in the West through its deconstruction. However, the particular focus of this doctoral project is to firstly consider the limitations of these approaches, which I argue in Chapter One presents the male body as being hard, coherent, and controllable, which in turn displaces the 'sloppiness' of embodiment onto the feminine (Thomas, 2008: 4). Through a Practice as Research (PaR) methodology, this thesis goes on to explore how hegemonic masculinity can be challenged through male body-based performance art by performing lived experiences of masculine identity and the male body.

The objectives of this thesis are:

1. To critically analyse a lineage of male artists who challenge normative representations of masculinity through exposing a cultural male corporeal fear.
2. To develop a series of strategies that make evident how the relationship between male corporeality and masculine identity can challenge normative representations of masculinity.

3. To produce a series of performances that demonstrate how these strategies can be synthesised with scholarly writing on masculinity to offer a new performance vocabulary for male artists.

To achieve these aims and objectives, this thesis looks to answer four questions. These are:

1. How can male artists challenge normative representations of masculinity without reinscribing normative traits, behaviours and characteristics into the performance space?
2. Why is it important for the personal experience of masculine identity to be considered by male artists in the making of their work?
3. Why might the male body be used to challenge normative representations of masculinity?
4. How, and why, might a destabilisation of normative masculinity be reconsidered as a result of the strategies that emerge through this thesis?

## **Masculine Performativity and the Restored Behaviours of Masculinity in Performance**

The images of *Rosie the Riveter* and Jackson Pollock make explicit that masculinity is more complicated and nuanced than having a penis, although as Chapter Three of this thesis points out, even anatomy cannot be considered outside of cultural assumptions (Reeser, 2011: 13). Despite this, in common parlance, the term masculinity still seems to refer to men, and how they are 'naturally' expected to act, this is because '[m]ass culture generally assumes

[that] there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of “real men”, “natural men”, the “deep masculine” (Connell, 2005: 45). However, masculinity is not ontologically linked to the male body, masculinity is a gender, which means as well as being an identity it is also a social role and a political place of power. As a gender then, it is demonstrated through how men behave and act, as well as in relation to the libidinal drives of the male body, the institutions that influence men, and how these elements produce meaning together (Connell, 2005: 71–72).

### **Defining Masculinity and Patriarchy**

The etymology of gender comes from the Latin genus which means a kind, type or sort, and sociologist John Money introduced it in the 1960s to describe the different sex roles of men and women (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 3). Considering the etymology of the term, gender can be summed up as the social categorisation of bodies into particular socially-defined texts, which include behaviours, characteristics, and traits. The classification of these bodies, within a heteronormative Western context, results in each body being ideally placed into one of two gendered options: feminine or masculine. In this respect, gender can be described as a series of texts that define how individual bodies are socially required to act. To understand masculinity then, at least within the West, one has to see it in opposition to femininity; in fact, one of the defining features of masculinity is its rejection of feminine qualities on the male body such as passivity, domesticity, and emotions (Clare, 2001: 69).

Therefore it seems that we come to know our identities, or more specifically what it means to be masculine or feminine, by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others”, but these categorisations are problematic

(Kimmel, 2000: 91). To identify that there are two simple definitions of gender, masculinity and femininity, is to assume that gender is essential to defining the sexed subject (Kimmel, 2000: 10). This is achieved because those characteristics, behaviours and traits of gender are consistently reinforced in our day-to-day lives. We can see this happening through film, television, advertisements and even the way we engage with bureaucracy. Here I am thinking about the way that some forms ask for your gender but give you the options of male and female instead.

Accepted gender norms are rehearsed so often by individuals, and policed by others that they feel like a natural part of one's identity; as a result of being male, it is assumed culturally that men are to be masculine (Butler, 2007: 178). Gender is not an ontological marker of male and female though, but fictive illusions on our bodies that as a society we look for in others. It depends on how convincingly gender is read on the other body that affects the way in which that subject is treated, and to what extent they are included or excluded from patriarchal privilege. Such criteria for gendered identity is what Butler refers to as the performativity of gender (Butler, 2007: 190). Gender then could be described in a similar manner to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon; gender is socially adhered to and convincingly performed because there is always the threat that someone else will be watching you, even if they are not (Duncan, 1994: 50). As Alexandra Howson notes in relation to the construction of masculinity, 'young men do things to, and talk about their bodies in ways that construct and police appropriate masculine behaviours – in affect self-regulating normative behaviours' (Howson, 2013: 67). In this respect, gender is not a noun or a set of free flowing attributes instead it is performatively produced and

compelled by regulatory gender coherence (Butler, 2007: 34). The result of this is an assumption that all men should be masculine and all women should be feminine, but like all binary oppositions there is a further assumption, that is one side of the binary should dominate the other (Derrida, 2005: 22).

This hierarchical categorisation is value laden and creates an imaginary order or system, with superficial meanings that operate at a surface level. In the case of the West's gender system, which is presented above, men and women are separated into categories based on their physical traits. For patriarchy as a system of power to be maintained, masculinity is afforded the characteristics and behavioural traits of strength, authority and control, whereas femininity is linked to passivity, weakness, incoherence, and can be aligned with embodiment (Thomas, 2008). As a result, masculinity becomes privileged over femininity, and it is this social construction that places particular men in culturally influential positions as a consequence of the scripts they perform on their bodies. It is worth noting though, that while masculinity might be seen in opposition to femininity, Eric Anderson (2012) argues that the dominance of hegemonic masculinity is not as a result of men oppressing women. Instead, hegemonic representations come about as a result of men fearing that they may be perceived as homosexual and therefore feminine (Anderson, 2012: 7). In periods where homosexual anxiety is low in men, which Anderson argues is indicative of the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there is also a decrease in sexism (Anderson, 2012: 8). Conversely, in periods where compulsory heterosexuality merges with homophobia, 'femophobia' also manifests, and it is this that he argues allows some men to oppress both women and gay men.

Anderson's (2012) argument is that the gendered power relations between masculine and feminine are not just between men and women. However, this does not mean that all masculinities are dominant and all gay men are feminine. As Judith Halberstam notes, there are also examples of masculinities that are rejected by mainstream society (Halberstam, 1998: 3). Such masculinities include homosexual, lesbian, disabled and transgendered people, who can perform different elements pertaining to a masculine identity but who also become a repository for what is symbolically expelled from normative masculinity (Connell, 2005: 78). A man, for example, might perform the qualities of strength, power and control in relation to others, but if his sexual preference is seen as deviating towards men, his masculinity is rejected as not being normal<sup>1</sup> (Howson, 2013: 65).

The system that is being referred to here is called patriarchy, and as implied above, while this system is designed to benefit men, not all men benefit from it, and even those that do, do not experience all the advantages in the same way (hooks, 2004: 18). Patriarchy does not explain the construction and acceptance of a particular type of masculinity; rather it is the system that continues to keep many men in power (MacInnes, 2004: 314). That is not to suggest though that masculinity and patriarchy are completely separate concepts. Connell (2005) articulates that the masculine representation of men who benefit from patriarchy can be described as being hegemonic, which derives from Antonio Gramsci's use of the term, and implies a group of men that

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<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted though that, Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack also argue that in younger generations of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the stigmatisation of homosexuality has significantly reduced and this raises the questions as to whether sexuality troubles representations of masculinity at all at the moment (Anderson & McCormack, 2014: 134). However, their position is still in debate, for more information please see Ingram & Waller (2014) and Gough, Hull and Seymour, Smith (2014).



claim and sustain a leading position in social life (Connell, 2005: 77). Hegemonic discourse is the established concept of 'normality', and in Western society this is defined as being 'able-bodied/minded', white, male, heterosexual, young and financially secure (Shakespeare, 1998: 201, and Pitt & Sanders, 2010: 37).

Consequently, when the phrase 'normative representations of masculinity' is used in this thesis, it refers to the visual signification of the dominant discourses of masculinity. Such signifiers might include being white, middle-class, heterosexual and non-disabled, but it also applies to physical demonstrations of strength, power, control, and fortitude in those men. This is referred to in Chapter One as being an image of hypermasculinity, and I argue that some male artists perform it as a way of challenging its position. However, those traits, behaviours and characteristics are also reinforced, without challenge, across a variety of social practices and environments. In Chapter One I refer to it through examples of mainstream media, such as films, television programmes and sports personalities. In Chapter Three, I also explain how it is part of a heteronormative pornographic landscape.

### **Restoring Normative Masculinity into the Performance Space**

This thesis in part argues that from around the 1960s a distinct trope in male body art emerged that attempted to reclaim territory ceded to women to collapse the oppositional binaries that supported hegemonic masculinity of that time. In Chapter One I define this trope as *Muscular Masculinity*, which refers to a metaphor that I feel is indicative of the work that these artists produce. The 'muscular' in muscular masculinity has a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to muscularity and the hypermasculinised images of men who

demonstrate power and control over and through their bodies. In this case, it nods towards the hard rigid body of the male weightlifter whose thin skin is pulled taught over his bulging muscles. Simultaneously, it also makes reference to the body that is hidden, the area of the body that is culturally displaced on to the feminine, the inside, or as Drew Leder (1990) refers to it as, the recessive body. In this respect, muscular is not just a nod to the bulging arm, or a metaphorical reference to power and control, but it is also the materiality of the male body. It foregrounds the fibrous muscle that helps all of us move, its sinew, and the blood that pumps through it. It refers to the tendon that links the muscle to the bone.

In this thesis, I read the function of muscular masculinity as making explicit the contradictions associated with normative representations of masculinity. In performances that I define as being indicative of muscular masculinity, the inside and the outside of the body are located together in the space. I argue that the image that is usually constructed in these works is one that demonstrates the male artist's ability to withstand the recessive, to not allow it to challenge the coherence of his body. However, at the same time I argue that in doing so, and as with the photographic images of Jackson Pollock, those artists reveal something in excess of the signifying symbolic codes of hypermasculinity. They expose a male corporeal fear that undermines the image of the hypermasculine. While the specifics of muscular masculinity are explored in the next chapter, it is worth noting that there is a common performance strategy being employed here that is well trodden in other performances that challenge normative representations of identity across race, class, disability and sexuality.

The destabilisation of normative masculinity in muscular masculinity comes from its excessive performance of hegemonic behaviours, characteristics and traits by the male artist. The point being that in doing so, they raise concerns and questions regarding men and the role they play in Western society. Muscular masculinity offers forward a similar process to the works of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña who, in the early part of the 1990s, made performances in response to the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus. In *Newly Discovered Amerindians* (1992) Fusco and Gómez-Peña parody how 'exotic peoples' were exhibited by, and to, Europeans and Americans from European dissent. They achieved this by playing upon the tropes of colonial curiosity, where indigenous people were exhibited in zoos, parks, taverns, museums and freak shows (Fusco, 1995: 40). As with Gómez-Peña's and Roberto Sifuentes' performance *Temple of Confessions* (1994), which took on a similar format, *Newly Discovered Amerindians* is less about othered identities of the performers and more about a Western audiences' cultural projections and inability to deal with cultural otherness (Gómez-Peña, 1996: 23).

The performances of Fusco, Gómez-Peña, and Sifuentes are an example of what Richard Schechner refers to in *Between Anthropology and Theater* (1985) as restored behaviour. There is also an echo of this concept in his book *Performance Theory* (2004), where he argues that any behaviour can be considered as performance. This position is reliant upon Erving Goffman's observation in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that to make concrete our identities we perform them to a multitude of audiences (Goffman, 1959: 23). Thus Schechner argues that if orthodox representations of performance, dance,

theatre and performance art can be described through the process of 'doing', practising and rehearsing, so can other practices. As such, any behaviour, event, or act, from religious and spiritual events to our everyday practices, requires the training or adjustment of culturally specific behaviours (Schechner, 2004: 23).

Following Schechner's proposition, Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Roberto Sifuentes can be seen to not perform the behaviours and characteristics of their identity, instead, they are performing the performance of identities. It is possible to observe this because the behaviours, characteristics and traits that they present have been 'treated'. In the case of *Newly Discovered Amerindians*, the performers hyperbolically perform the stereotypes placed upon them by the West such as wearing 'tribal' dress, sewing voodoo dolls, eating burritos and drinking diet coke. These treated actions become 'independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence' (Schechner, 1985: 35). Restored behaviour then is defined as being different from the artist's identity for they are considered to be performing as if they are someone else (Schechner, 1985: 37).

Schechner also argues however that restored behaviour is symbolic and reflexive for it presents social, religious and educational processes in formal performances, which creates a feedback loop that tells people how to act in their everyday lives (Schechner, 1985: 36). While Schechner's argument is initially based upon religious performances, it is still possible to witness self-reflexivity and symbolism in *Newly Discovered Amerindians*, albeit in a more complicated format. In this work, Fusco and Gómez-Peña make explicit how colonial thought still defines the bodies of people of colour, which in turn defines

their identities. By performing tropes created by centuries of colonial curiosity, the aim is to make explicit a cultural fear of otherness that still exists in the West, which results in non-normative bodies being perceived as objects and not as living subjects. Their performances are not designed to teach others how to be people of colour rather they make explicit the objectifying gaze of the West. Thus the work is intended so that the spectator in recognising the stereotypes performed in front of them also recognise their own prejudices, which hopefully enacts a transformation in them.

The argument presented in this thesis though is that restored behaviour displayed in this way is specifically a problem for white male artists in the West. Following Schechner's (1985) argument, reflexivity in these performances (as discussed further in Chapter Two) is about reflecting backwards on one's interpretation of the work and then offering forward action in the hope of transformation. I am unconvinced that this level of destabilisation can be present in a work that re-performs normative masculinity. I can see that these male artists may not be performing their own gendered identities, which in turn suggests that the restoration of normative masculinity in these performances is designed to highlight patriarchal constructs. However, the question remains who are the performances for? Whilst patriarchy might remain invisible to those men who benefit from it, normative masculinity is very much visible to those who are marginalised by it. Furthermore, by performing normative masculinity as "not-me", those male artists have the opportunity to not take account of their own patriarchal complicity. This occurs because they are afforded the opportunity to displace privilege on to a male subject other than their self, a male subject that might ambiguously be referred to as 'The Sexist'. As feminist

scholar Sara Ahmed notes in relation to the performance of whiteness: 'Calling for whiteness [and normative masculinity] to be seen can exercise rather than challenge white privilege, as the power to transform one's vision into a property of attribute of something or somebody' (Ahmed, 2004: par 16).

## **Defining Male Body-Based Performance Art**

What distinguishes the performances that I have made in this PaR project from the artists in Chapter One who I describe as performing muscular masculinity is the way in which I have attempted to challenge hegemony. Rather than performing a masculinity that I see as "not me" I have aimed to explore my masculine identity, and my lived experiences of it. The purpose of this was to identify how lived experiences can be seen to deviate from normative masculinity. However, much scholarly writing on the representations of gender in body art comes from the position of the spectator and their own intersubjective reading of that work, and I felt like this needed to be attended to. So, when I use the term '*based*' in body-based performance art I am emphasising a knowledge that is located within me through the medium of body art; I am not proposing here a new performance medium with its own lineage, rather I am suggesting a shift of emphasis from spectator to performer.

## **Performance/Performance Art/Live Art**

From the perspective of art history, performance art emerged alongside the civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970 (Schneider, 1997: 3). Although this form encompasses what Roselee Goldberg identifies as 'actions, body art, and large, opera-scale events', she also notes that the definition of performance art itself is open-ended (Goldberg, 2004: 12). Jane Blocker

echoes this position by stating that there has been no single cohesive moment or manifesto that has been able to pin down this term firmly. That it emerged as a global phenomenon (here she cites the Viennese Actionists and the Japanese Gutai) seems to prove her point for this 'suggest[s] that there was no means of limiting, naming, or codifying this impulse' (Blocker, 2004: 3). Yet, even the term performance art is a sloppy approximation, sometimes referred to as simply performance, or in the United Kingdom as Live Art, these different articulations promote slightly different understandings and lineages.

Adrian Heathfield for example in his introduction to *Live: Art and Performance* notes its beginnings were not in the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and 70s, but actually in modernist movements such as Dada and Situationism (Heathfield, 2004: 8). In 1994 Nick Kaye proposed that performance art could be seen as having generated two distinct traditions, one North American and Continental European approach and a British one. He argued that from the intersection of experimental theatre and performance art emerged Live Art and its resistance to critical discourse (Kaye, 1994). Conversely, Deirdre Heddon argues that Live Art encompasses performance art, and not the other way round. Furthermore, she notes that Live Art also includes Fluxus, happenings, 'Action Art', land art, digital work, devised performances, site-specific practice and experimental film and video (Heddon, 2012: 2). Yet Heike Roms and Rebecca Edwards argue in their survey of Live Art in the United Kingdom that whilst performance was not established until the 1970s, there was a distinct practice before that, which can be articulated as Live Art and which was not experimental theatre (Roms & Edwards, 2012: 18). Instead,

they locate these important events within the traditions of poetry, sculpture, fine art and music (Roms & Edwards, 2012: 24).

However, while I have highlighted a few of the many interpretations of performance art from Goldberg's (2004) loose definition and lineage through to Roms' and Edward's (2012) more focused British version, a common theme does link them all. Performance, performance art, and Live Art can all be seen to respond to or challenge a socio-political discourse. Goldberg (2004), for example, makes explicit that provocation is performance art's key characteristic, and, because of this, artists have used it as a way of responding to social change (Goldberg, 2004: 13). Similarly, on their website, the Live Art Development Agency state that Live Art is about disrupting borders, breaking the rules, defying traditions, resisting definitions, asking awkward questions and activating audiences (Live Art Development Agency, n.d: para. 9).

One such challenge took place in the 1960s and 70s when the heavy mantle of high art was put under scrutiny, by performance artists who declared that everyday life was not only material for art, but also art itself (Goldberg, 2004). Their political positioning was not just about challenging conceptions of art making and commodity, it was also about challenging the patriarchal/capitalist culture that surrounded it at the time. Such a challenge was achieved through the temporality of the body in space, which was used by artists to disrupt the mechanics of commodification in the art industry in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Jones, 1998: 37). This approach to challenging commodification through the use of corporeality has also continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As Heddon notes, activist performance collectives and artists such as



*Platform*<sup>2</sup> still use the performer's body to disrupt the smooth mechanisation of capitalism, but, in the 21st Century, this is in relation to more diverse economic environments (Heddon, 2013: 196).

What performance demonstrates, and I use this term temporarily in the way Goldberg (2004) does, is that the materiality of the body, and the performer's actions and residues can be seen as political statements against dominant political discourse. As Heathfield states '[t]he physical entry of the artist's body into the artwork is a transgressive gesture that confuses the distinction between subject and object, life and art: a move that challenges the properties that rest on such divisions' (Heathfield, 2004: 11). The body then, as discussed in Chapter One, can be seen in performance art as a metaphor for wider political concerns. In *The Explicit Body in Performance*, for example, Schneider explains how artists such as Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley, and Carolee Schneemann created performances that made explicit parts of the body that have remained culturally hidden. The purpose of these feminist performance art practices was to play across the body of the artists the cultural construction of their gender or race (Schneider, 1997: 3), which is discussed further in Chapter Four.

## **Body Art**

It is because of the way those artists that I have mentioned above, and others like them, have used their body in their work that they have come to be defined as body artists, a term that Goldberg (2004: 12) encompasses into the lineage of performance art. In her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998),

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<sup>2</sup> Platform is an art collective based in London who combines art, activism, education and pedagogy to create projects driven by social and ecological justice. For more information visit their website at <http://platformlondon.org/>

Amelia Jones contests this position by arguing that there is an important and significant difference between the two. Seemingly echoing some of the arguments above she recognises its relationship to performance art, but positions body art as having a lineage in visual arts, thus seeing it as a complex extension of portraiture in general (Jones, 1998: 13). From this position, the body is used not just in the content of the work but also as the canvas, brush, frame and platform (Jones, 2006b: 4). Kathy O'Dell makes a similar distinction in her argument for using the term performance art instead of body art in *Contact with the Skin*. She suggests that performance art places emphasis on:

[...] the action and function of the artist. Thus, the instrumentality of the art form's primary material, the body, is highlighted without giving so much weight to the individualistic character of that body that the viewer might not be able to form a useful identification (O'Dell, 1998: 87)

Following these arguments, body art is not, as proposed by Kate Linker, 'a term that means little more than an artist's use of his or her body as a tool or surface for activity' (Linker, 1994: 28). Body art does not even specifically refer to the 'live' corporeal presence of the artist's body in the work, for as Jones notes in her survey of body art, it can take its form in live performance, photography or film (Jones, 2006b). Rather, what epitomises body art is its ability to offer both a trace to the artist's subjectivity, and, because there is always something supplementary in the signification of the body, it promotes an intersubjective exchange between artist and spectator (Jones, 1998: 34); this is discussed further in Chapter Two.

Because of body art's focus on the body as a trace to subjectivity, one of its purposes is to render visible the cultural and social marginalisation of particular forms of embodiment (Heddon, 2012: 184). A considerable amount of

body art deliberately puts the body under stress through marking, cutting and piercing, and as Simon Shepherd argues: 'This foregrounds a point that can be forgotten [...], culture and way of life, in training a body for society, have their impact on the biological thing itself' (Shepherd, 2006: 5). Therefore, as Chapter One of this thesis points out, male artists such as Ron Athey through his cutting practice, and Stuart Brisley and Gilbert and George through their embracement of bodily fluids, make explicit the leakiness and fluidity of the male body. In doing so, they place emphasis on the notion that embodiment in hegemonic culture is projected onto the feminised as a way of sustaining the image of a coherent masculine body; at the same time these artists make explicit that all bodies leak, including male ones.

Moving away from the link between corporeality and identity, body art can also be seen to echo many aspects of what Antonin Artaud calls for in *Theatre of Cruelty*. Instead of a language based on words, Artaud's performances, and by extension body art, allows for a physical language to emerge from the body (as discussed in Chapter Three) (Artaud, 1985: 83). The point of this language is to make explicit the ambiguity associated with the body and allow this to infect culturally perceived fixed identifications of gender. By foregrounding the corporeal knowledge that emerges from this, artists can challenge the hegemonic categorisation of bodies into masculine or feminine. In doing so, body art has the ability to expose these culturally constructed distinctions as ambiguous (Vergine, 2000: 9). It is because of its capacity to expose ambiguity that body art is used in this thesis as a useful strategy for undermining the images of male identity in the West.

## Defining Body-Based Performance Art

There are some issues associated with Jones' (1998) articulation of body art though. Simon Shepherd and Nick Wallis, for example, argue that her articulation of the differences between body art and performance is 'a too nice a' distinction, for it denies the breadth of performance (Shepherd & Wallis, 2004: 149). Furthermore, Ann Daly argues that Jones' rejection of performance art in favour of her definition of body art is simply an illustration of academic theory rather than a cultural condition. Her definition does not, as Jones' wishes it to, provide the intersubjective exchange of meaning that her readings of those works might suggest (Daly, 2000: 154). Jones offers, at least from Daly's position, an authoritative articulation that reflects the position of art critics that Jones is attempting to challenge in her book *Body Art. Performing the Subject* (Jones, 1998).

Despite the arguments presented above, I am still seduced by the possibility of Jones' emphasis on the body and her focus on a phenomenologically inflected feminism that informs the readings of her work (Jones, 1998: 15). I can see that the privileging of the body in body art and the bringing closer of the spectator to the work makes explicit the identity of the body artist as lacking in coherence. What body art demonstrates to me is that it can be used to challenge the characteristics, behaviours and traits of gender that are used to present some men as coherent and therefore powerful subjects.

My primary concern with Jones' (1998) articulation of body art is that its potential to challenge patriarchal binary oppositions is formulated only from the perspective of the spectator reading the work. Thus from this position, Jones' (1994 and 1998) reading of how male body artists deconstruct masculinity can

only rest with her. That is, there is very little in the way of knowing how intersubjectivity has affected the male artist's understanding of those works in the moment of performing. This project, while still valuing the tracing back to the subjectivity<sup>3</sup> of the artist through the spectator, is interested in the knowledge that is generated from my experiences as a male artist. As such, my aim in this thesis is to proffer a term that implies the complexity associated with the disciplines of performance and body art, embraces intersubjectivity as described by Jones (1998), and at the same time makes explicit my lived experiences of masculinity. The term body-based performance art is used then to define this type of work.

In Chapter Two I outline Vito Acconci's<sup>4</sup> contribution to defining body-based performance art by demonstrating his potential to provide a type of self-reflection in his work that to some extent considers his body within a social context. Although I also note in Chapter Two that his work does not fully meet the criteria for self-reflexivity because there is no evidence that change actually occurs, and furthermore his reflections are passive. I argue that body-based performance art foregrounds not only an intersubjective exchange between spectator and artist with regards to both the work and the representation of their identity, as seen in Chapter Three of this thesis. It also encourages the male artist to consider their experiences of having a body in relation to their masculine identity, as demonstrated in Chapter Two. It is the tensions that arise from these considerations that I argue can destabilise normative representations of masculinity without them being reinscribed into the performance space.

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<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Three, I explore the tracing back of intersubjectivity from the spectator to the artist

<sup>4</sup> While not mentioned in this thesis, I would also argue that John Duggan might also be considered to engage a self-reflexive strategy in his work

## Methodology

To achieve the aims set out at the beginning of this introduction a PaR methodology was employed where three processual body-based performances became a central part of this thesis. The associated documentation of the first two performances and a selection of their rehearsal experiments can be found on two DVDs in Appendix D, and the scores for all three performances can be found in Appendix C. The first performance, *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012), which forms the primary discussion outlined in Chapter Two, was focussed on exploring why my identity could be used to challenge hegemonic representations of masculinity. Although, this work was less about how one could generate strategies for challenging normative masculine identity and more about how a destabilisation would manifest in the performance. It is for this reason that Chapter Two places emphasis on the moment of performance across two venues rather than the rehearsal process.

Conversely, the purpose of the second performance, *Talking about Keith* (2013), which is discussed in Chapter Three, was designed to reflect upon my experiences in *Spitting Distance* and develop strategies from what I observed. Moreover, rather than focussing on how my masculine identity might be challenged in the performance space, I wanted to explore how and why my body and experiences of corporeality could challenge hegemony through male body-based art. Thus, rather than placing emphasis on the moment of performance as I did in *Spitting Distance*, Chapter Three explores the making processes of *Talking about Keith*. It is worth noting though that the distinctions made between the two performances and their subsequent chapters in this methodological outline is for the purpose of clearly articulating the focus of each

work. In practice, the understandings that I developed through these works slipped between the moment of performance and the making processes.

The third performance in this thesis, *Generous Enema* (2016) draws together the understandings developed from the first two performances, and is used in Chapter Four to articulate an approach to challenging hegemonic masculinity that I refer to as generosity. For this reason, *Generous Enema* might formally be seen as sitting at the intersections of *Spitting Distance* and *Talking about Keith*, and therefore be a summative moment where knowledge is generated. I argue in Chapter Four that the knowledge generated through *Generous Enema* is located in the experience of the performance, however as with the other two, all three works in this doctoral project use Robin Nelson's dynamic model to help extrapolate that knowledge (Nelson, 2013: 37). There are of course a number of other PaR approaches<sup>5</sup> that could have been considered, however, I felt that Nelson's model was important to this project because of its explicit triangulation of three knowledge domains: the first, tacit knowledge, focuses on the experiences in performance; conceptual knowledge, which is the second domain, is associated with critical lenses and artistic lineages; the third knowledge domain is critical reflection (Nelson, 2013: 44).

Despite being part of Nelson's (2013) conceptual knowledge domain, the methodological approach for this thesis did not rely on audience response surveys, and there are a number of reasons for this. The first was that, as previously mentioned, the emphasis in the performance projects was not based on the audiences' ability to identify the challenge occurring to hegemony through body art. Instead, my aim was to focus on my understandings of how

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<sup>5</sup> For more discussions on PaR methodologies please refer to Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (2007), Helen Nicholson and Baz Kershaw (2011), and John Freeman (2010), although this is not an exhaustive list.

my identity and my body might be challenged in those spaces, which is why I have placed emphasis on body-based art rather than body art. Secondly, and as I discuss in Chapter Three, I became interested in how the performances that I was making were streaked with different meanings, not only as a result of the various social structures of each participant but also because of their corporeal responses, which evaded linguistic fixity. As such, I felt that to capture only some of these moments, particularly through writing, would risk fixing the work.

Towards the beginning of this project, I did go through a process of collecting informal responses to *Spitting Distance* through social media platforms and live discussions. What became apparent to me as a result of this process, and this is something that is explored further in Chapters Two and Three, was that what challenged hegemonic discourse in my work was the distinction between the interpretation of my experiences in the performance space, and my interpretations of the experiences of other's. To locate the responses of the participants would potentially alleviate the anxiety that I experienced and in turn relieve me of struggle, which I develop further on in the concluding chapter. Furthermore, and as I discuss in Chapter Three, it is the gaps that exist as a result of intersubjectivity that allows others to speak through my identity, which in turn, as Chapter Four highlights, allows unknowability to emerge.

### **Defining the Terrain**

The starting point for this project was the construction of a lineage of male body artists whose works demonstrated, to varying degrees, the potential for destabilising hegemonic masculinity. The purpose of this task was to



identify what performance strategies those artists employed and why a destabilisation occurs. My critique of this lineage is presented in Chapters One and Two, but its purpose also has a practical application as it led me to the proposition of my performance making strategies by temporally mapping out a terrain that had already been established by other artists. An artistic lineage, or artistic audit as Brad Haseman defines it, is more than simply witnessing performance though. It is a theory-dependent activity that relies upon the auditor to be able to detect the subtleties and nuances of the work (Haseman, 2006: 106). In her Higher Education Academy<sup>6</sup> (HEA) report on research methods curriculums for postgraduate courses Amanda Wood identifies self-selective criteria as a way of providing the theory sensitive enough to detect the subtleties of an artistic lineage (Wood, n.d: 13).

I identified five criteria for the purpose of constructing my lineage, which I adapted and refined throughout this research project. These criteria are not only indicative of my research aims, but also of the understanding that I have developed over the past five years. It is because the criteria were generated over this period through the analysis of my performance practice (see Chapters Two, Three, and Four) and other examples of male body art (see Chapters One and Two) that they have come to represent, what I understand, as strategies that destabilise normalcy. Having said this, it is worth noting that not every artist work achieves all of the criteria outlined below, although each performance did have to meet at least three of them.

The criteria are:

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<sup>6</sup> The HEA is a national body in the United Kingdom that 'champions teaching quality [...] by focusing on the contribution of teaching as part of the wider student learning experience' (HEA, n.d: par 1).

1. Male artists who use themselves in their performances to challenge normative representations of masculinity.
2. Male artists who use the materiality of their body, for example, blood, faeces, or semen, to challenge normative representations of masculinity.
3. Male artists who use their autobiographical narratives as strategies for challenging hegemonic representations of masculinity.
4. Male artists who collapse gender boundaries without reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about gender.
5. Male artists who offer a self-reflexive strategy in their work, either in the process of making or in performance, that considers their position and actions in the world around them.

### **Psychoanalysis as a Critical Lens**

Both my ability to judge the extent to which those artists challenged hegemonic masculine ideology, and my approach to making performance for this doctoral project, was influenced by Jacques Lacan's sexuation matrix. There are two concepts that I used specifically to define this matrix, the first was the idea of the phallus (2001a) and the second was the mirror stage (Lacan, 2001c). Although, in addition to these, I also drew upon other concepts related to Lacanian psychoanalysis such as the domains of the real and the symbolic, as well as the objet petit a. The choice of Lacanian psychoanalysis for this thesis was due to the similarities that it shares with performance, and more specifically body art. Estelle Barrett notes that both psychoanalysis and performance rely on an intersubjective transference of knowledge where

analysand and analyst or performer and spectator generate meaning together as a result of their interactions (Barrett, 2011: 92). I develop this concept further in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Another similarity is observed by Patrick Campbell who in *Psychoanalysis and Performance* notes the way that the dialogic exchange in performance can, like psychoanalysis, 'throw into relief crucial questions about human behaviour' (Campbell, 2002: 1). It is clear from this quote that Campbell's interest is in live performance, but other scholars from other disciplines have also used psychoanalysis in similar ways. Feminist scholars such as Laura Mulvey<sup>7</sup>, have used Lacan's *Signification of the Phallus* (2001a) to demonstrate the way in which relationships between the sexes had been culturally defined through mainstream films from the 1950s. In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) Mulvey uses Lacan's phallic order as a political weapon to make explicit the control patriarchy has in the West (Mulvey, 1999: 834). Her point being that films, specifically those from the 1950s, perpetually reinforce the social structures that define the sexes, which some men benefit from.

The way that Laura Mulvey (1999) uses Lacan's concepts here is based on the way that psychoanalysis centralises the role of identification in the development of subjectivity. More specifically, and as Fintan Walsh notes, Lacanian psychoanalysis lays identification at the very foundations of subjectivity (Walsh, 2011: 17). That being, as a result of seeing her image in the mirror as an infant, the subject is constantly looking to find ways to identify

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<sup>7</sup> There are feminist performance scholars who have challenged hegemonic ideals through the application of Lacanian psychoanalysis including Peggy Phelan (1993 and 1998), Amelia Jones (1998), Kathy O'Dell (1998) and Cuneys Çakırlar (2011). These will be discussed in later chapters.

herself as being whole, coherent and unified; to do this she has to employ the phallus (Lacan, 2001a). What Mulvey (1999) reveals in her article, and I discuss later in Chapter One, is that to define their image as strong, powerful, and controlling, men do not just take command of the phallus they become it as well. There are problems with Mulvey's reading of narrative cinema from the 1950s, the most obvious being that it privileges a heteronormative dynamic without considering the potential voyeuristic gaze associated with the homosexual man (Neale, 1983). Furthermore, I would argue that whilst her theory acts as a cultural commentary of its time, it does little in the way of destabilising patriarchal representations of masculinity.

Hence, the way that Lacan is used in this thesis is as a tool to demonstrate the fragility of hegemony and to undermine the authority that has been culturally associated with the masculine subject. It achieves this because Lacan's concepts are heavily informed by post-structural linguistics, which allows him to challenge the idea that the subject is essential and knowable. It is because Lacan conceives the subject as a discursive construct, fragmented and unstable (Walsh, 2011:19), that allows me in Chapter One to demonstrate masculinity as an impossible image to fully achieve. For, whilst the qualities of the phallus can be seen to be present in the cultural images of men in Western mainstream media, these are only performative texts. As such, because the body is always alienated from language, because it is something that the subject learns rather than is born with, most men are not able to demonstrate all of the behaviour characteristics and traits of a singular normative masculine blueprint (Barrett, 2001:19).

To read gender and sex relations through Lacanian psychoanalysis has its limitations though, for, as Chapter Three outlines, masculinity is much more complicated than the exchange of signs and meanings. That is, it is not just the demonstration of specific characteristics, behaviours and traits (Jones, 1998: 5). To only focus on the discursive is to evoke a mind/body dualism that does not take into account the lived experiences of masculinity. Psychoanalysis promotes this position because Lacan (2001b) emphasises a maternal bodily sacrifice that the infant is required to make in order to have the privilege of understanding self (Lacan, 2001: 5). For this reason, a slightly different framework is needed in the creation of the performances associated with this thesis than that which was used in the artistic lineage. Whilst my approach in Chapter Three was still influenced by Lacan's concept of the phallus, and Chapter Two relied on the articulation of phallic masculinity, I also used a process that emphasised my male corporeality, my experiences of my body, and the impact that these have on my masculine identity. Moreover, these approaches focused on the contradictions, ambiguity and anxiety associated with the lived experiences of masculinity in relation to a patriarchal ideology.

### **Employing Lived Experiences of Masculinity in Performance**

To extrapolate the knowledge that emerged from my lived experiences of masculine identity I applied a general phenomenological focus in the making processes, the performance, and to some extent my interactions with individuals outside of both. However, in Johanna Oksala's attempt to understand gender through phenomenology, she argues that established phenomenological approaches are not useful (Oksala, 2006: 229). She suggests for example that classical phenomenology does not take into account

the lived experiences of the body (2006: 30), whereas the phenomenology as offered by Merleau-Ponty essentialises particular sexed bodies to specific genders (2006: 232). The act of essentialising corporeality is an accusation that has also been made towards French feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and while not claiming to be a feminist scholar, Julia Kristeva<sup>8</sup> as well. Instead, Oksala (2006) states that we must give up the first person perspective altogether and attempt to understand gendered experience through anthropological and sociological investigations. The point being is that to study different systems of normativity helps to make the reader of those texts aware of the hidden aspects of their own thoughts about gender and their experience of it (Oksala, 2006: 239).

However, my position is slightly different from Oksala (2006), for whilst to understand the hidden aspects of our own thoughts about gender is important, what is useful to this project is attempting to understand how my body can challenge my gendered identity. Or, to make explicit how dominant discourses mask the ambiguity of my male body in everyday life. To understand my experiences, I have employed two of Julia Kristeva's texts, *The Powers of Horror* (1982) and *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), for their ability to cause a revolt. By this, I do not necessarily mean revolt in the sense of transgression, although as Chapters One and Two points out this can be the case if need be. Instead, I use this term in the same manner in which Kristeva uses it in *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* where dominant discourses of "truth" in contemporary society are destabilised by making explicit what is not spoken about (Kristeva, 2001: 5).

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<sup>8</sup> I discuss this further in Chapter Two.

Two of Kristeva's concepts, the abject in *Powers of Horror* (1982) and the *thetic space* in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), are used in this thesis as a way of demonstrating potential moments of revolt occurring in my practice. Both concepts involve the body, the first, used in Chapters One and Two, refers to the bodily fluids that are thrust aside so that a secure normative identity can be formed (Kristeva, 1982: 3). The second, explored in Chapter Three, is the metaphorical space that acts as a gate or filter between the body and language (Kristeva, 1984: 44–45). The point of using both in the making and reading of practice is to 'initiate a process that can collapse meaning, but which is nonetheless fundamental to the constitution of identity and the renewal of meaning' (Barrett, 2011: 95). What Barrett (2011) and, subsequently, I mean by the collapsing of meaning to aid its renewal is the moment where the apparent fixity and logic of language is released to allow for polysemy to flow. That is, as a male artist I give up any attempt to close down the representation of my identity and instead open it up so as to allow audiences the freedom to interpret it.

In Chapter Two, I explore the potential for my own identity to become polysemous by opening up the gap between communication and the interpretation of information. By opening up that gap, I argue that anxiety emerges because it emphasises the construction of my identity as intersubjective and thus my lack as an autonomous self. Conversely in Chapter Three, my focus is placed upon how the materiality of my body can be used to collapse the logic of meaning making. Here, rather than exploring the hierarchical and metaphorical relationship between the body and language, my aim was to make metonymical links between these two realms. The

overarching concept that connects both the abject and thetic together in this thesis is that of abjection. Although, my focus here is not only on why I might have experienced abjection, but also where and why my experiences of abjection might offer new knowledge concerning gendered identity.

The performances reflected upon and discussed in Chapters Two and Three focus on different approaches to experiencing abjection. *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012) explores my experiences of having a male body and an abject identity. *Talking about Keith* (2013), on the other hand, explores my body as a signifying sign system and its ability to make my identity penetrable. Yet both start from the same point, that being the process of separating my experiences of my leaky male body from the memories that I associate with it. In Chapter Two, this is demonstrated through my use of an autobiographical narrative that was inspired by the abject male body. In Chapter Three, I look to separate my cultural expectations of semen from my experiences of manipulating it through a series of performance experiments.

Following van Manen, both approaches might be considered as the first part of a two-part phenomenological process (van Manen, 2014: 215). By re-performing my actions associated with my leaky body in a performance context, I am able to bracket off the original memory that I associate them with. This is important because the way that I remember those moments might actually be obstructing how I really experienced the phenomena of my visceral body. The lived experience of that moment in performance affords the possibility for my focus to be drawn back to that phenomena; a process that is called reduction. The point of reduction then, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, is to overcome one's subjectivity, or private feelings, preferences, and inclinations that would



usually prevent one from coming to terms with the lived experience of that phenomena (van Manen, 2014: 224).

In phenomenological terms, the concept of a 'lived experience', as used by Merleau-Ponty, 'announces the intent to explore directly the prereflective dimensions of human existence: life as we live it' (van Manen, 2014: 39). This is important to this thesis because it aims to consider gender outside of predefined Lacanian terms. It does this by making me aware that how I see and perceive my masculine identity are two entirely different things, as what is seen is distorted by the context that surrounds the object (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 114). The aim of phenomenology in this thesis then is to refer perception back to a stage where representations of masculinity are no longer confronted as explicit messages, but rather as extremely ambiguous texts akin to aesthetic ones (Eco, 1979: 31). I understand Eco's (1979) point here to be that our embodied experiences of the world around us are not clear and easily translatable into language and, as such, they rely on creative interpretations to make sense of phenomenon.

Therefore, the argument of this thesis depends upon the understanding that there are unspoken experiences associated with my masculine identity and male body that, when made explicit in performance, can be used to destabilise normative representations of masculinity without reinscribing them. I propose in this thesis, specifically in Chapters Two and Three, that a destabilisation can become apparent through the experiences of shame and anxiety about the security of one's identity. However, in Chapter Four, I also argue that a destabilisation can occur when bodily experiences abjected from normative masculinity are enjoyed or at least seen to be pleasurable by the male artist.

## Chapter Narratives

In Chapter One I sketch out how a series of three artists may be articulated as performing what I have come to define as muscular masculinity. In restoring hypermasculine images into the performance space, whilst manipulating the materiality of their bodies, I argue that these artists demonstrate control over their abject bodies. In doing so, I propose that they also end up performing a culturally constructed male corporeal anxiety associated with the inability for the male subject to achieve hegemonic ideology. The focus of Chapter Two is on how personal experiences of abject masculinity can be restored into the performance space without reinscribing the normative masculine texts that muscular masculinity appropriates. I propose that through my experiences of abjection I was able to performatively reveal myself as an intersubjective agent and expose the incoherence of masculine identity.

In Chapter Three, I develop upon the concept of performatively producing intersubjectivity and explore how the male body can be used as its own signifying sign system to open up the gaps between self and other further. Moreover, this chapter identifies how in performing the semiotic, the visceral aspects of male corporeality can be seen to performatively appear in the performance space. In Chapter Four, I propose that the approaches developed through *Spitting Distance* and *Talking about Keith* can be described as a type of generosity. This term expands upon P.A Skantze's (2007) definition of generosity in performance where she uses it to describe performance work as synonymous with the image of the begging bowl. Here audiences are encouraged to 'fill up' the performance with meaning whilst the artist deliberately creates gaps to be filled. In this chapter though I also reconsider

the assertion that is made in Chapter One, that being, Ron Athey's performances are indicative of muscular masculinity. Instead, I argue that both of our works can be seen to challenge normative masculine ideology by generously embracing the 'unknowable' pleasures associated with the abject.

## **Chapter 1: Performing Muscular Masculinity**

The purpose of this chapter is to define and demonstrate through three performances of male body art, from the late 20<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the performance trope that I have come to define as being muscular masculinity. Specifically developed for this thesis, muscular masculinity can be described as the demonstration of mastery over one's body as a way of controlling the abject. I argue that this results in the construction of a coherent image of masculinity, which adheres to the traits of patriarchal ideology. At the same time, muscular masculinity is also an excess of visual signification demonstrated through the artist's ability to perform a culturally constructed corporeal anxiety regarding the representation of the leaky male body, and its inability to achieve the hegemonic ideal.

### **1.1: Defining Muscular Masculinity**

When I think of the glossy images of men that bombard me on a day-to-day basis through media such as television, billboards, films and magazines I am met, more often than not, with a 'perfect' body. I admit that these idealised bodies have changed significantly even in the three decades that I have been alive. Instead of the strong, rough around the edges, persona of John McClane, played by Bruce Willis in the *Die Hard* movies, we are more likely to see in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century well-groomed, body conscious men, with tight torsos and bare chests. These images demonstrate two things to me. Even though they seem significantly different, they are both period specific graphic representations of an

idealised male body defined by patriarchy. Secondly, they both demonstrate characteristics, behaviours and traits that might be indicative of hypermasculinity. Bruce Willis, for example, dominates Others through demonstrations of power and strength; whereas those perfect images of men seem to have bodies that are controlled to the most minute of details.

### **1.1.1: The Phallus**

The image of hypermasculinity can be described as the physical manifestation of the phallus. In its Lacanian context though the phallus is not a signified, by that I mean it is not something that is symbolic of a penis, it is not a penis, and neither is it an object (Lacan, 2001a: 316). The phallus is described by Lacan as the signifier that covers up those aspects of corporeality that exceed the limits of language. It is a signifier and not a signified, because it is whatever makes the subject feel whole, unified, and coherent, manifested in language. Whether it is a particular type of lover, or a fetish, or characteristic, the phallus helps the subject move from the fragmented, anarchic, site of the body, to the security of the symbolic, the world that we would understand as language, law, and in turn subjectivity (Lacan, 2001a: 319). The phallus is a signifier then because it signifies the lack associated with subjectivity, that is, the lack of the subject ever really being whole as a result of their visceral body (Lacan, 2001a: 317).

It is precisely because the phallus is a signifier for whatever the subject desires, the term that Lacan uses to describe the bodily drives that exceed signification, that means she will never achieve what she desires (Lacan, 2001a: 318). The phallus then is simply a veil that cuts out the ambiguous codes of the body from the subject, and filters them through to the symbolic

world (Kristeva, 1984: 44); this results in a poor linguistic substitute for what her body really wants. Lacan argues though that the phallus can only play its part when veiled (Lacan, 2001a: 319). As such, the moment the phallus is revealed as being a veil is the instant when the gap between physiology and identity is exposed, and the subject experiences castration (Žižek, 2011: 34)

Within the context that is played out above, Lacan can be read as attempting to separate the phallus from corporeality. Despite this, there is still much ambiguity in his writing associated with the phallus and its relationship to the penis, which goes some way in explaining the penis/phallus conflation in the West. This phallic/penis conflation exists partly because of the way Lacan uses it to define the relationship between the sexes and how he describes its function. In *Signification of the Phallus* Lacan (2001a) proposes that the different roles of the phallus can be attributed to gendered nouns. Although Lacan is clear that these terms are, like the phallus, metaphorical and do not relate to biological sex, he uses normative gender descriptors as a way of defining their role. Masculinity, for Lacan, is seen as active and possessing the phallus, while the feminine is passive and performs it for the masculine subject (Lacan, 2001a: 320). Furthermore, literature scholar Murat Aydemir notes that when Lacan speaks of the phallus he evokes images of the male penis (Aydemir, 2007: 41). He notes that Lacan sees the phallus as acting as a copula between two domains (Aydemir, 2007: 42), as a bar or rod that is turgid (Aydemir, 2007: 43), and as the image of vital flow, which Aydemir reads as an ejaculating jet of potential meaning (Aydemir, 2007: 43–44).

As a result of Lacan's (2001a) ambiguous definition of the phallus and the cultural alignment of men with masculinity, a normative logic around

gendered identity emerges in his texts where the penis and phallus become conflated. It is possible to see this logic manifesting in Western cultural discourse, for whilst man is threatened with castration woman is deprived of it altogether and therefore she cannot access the symbolic because of her perceived lack of the phallus/penis (Gallop, 1990: 127). The female deprivation of the phallus/penis is an important position for men to promote as those who have access to the symbolic also have access to control and therefore confirm law rather than conform to it (Gallop, 1990: 126). Through Lacan's writing it is possible to see that the male subject has an investment in deliberately mistaking the phallus for his penis, so as to retain a position of cultural power and control (Gallop cited in Jones, 1994: 546). It is this that has encouraged some feminist scholars to define men who demonstrate these characteristics as performing phallic masculinity (Walsh, 2011: 21). Yet phallic masculinity is not about the body. Instead, it is about a self-assuredness that allows some men to retain control over themselves and other identities. When muscularity, or the male body, becomes the signified for the phallus, it is then that the subject comes to represent the hypermasculine (Brown, 2001: 174).

### **1.1.2: Performing Hypermasculinity**

The term hypermasculinity describes the ritualistic display of phallic attributes by men that affords some of them a dominant position in a patriarchal culture (Jones, 1994: 546). It is closely related to phallic masculinity, which Karl Figlio describes as being an invasive, arrogant and dominating coloniser of other bodies (Figlio, 2014: 4). What makes hypermasculinity different though is that power is visually signified on the male body rather than the subject being seen as inherently authoritative and in control. As a result of being subordinate

to phallic masculinity, hypermasculinity is used by individuals to enhance their status usually at the expense of other people and the person using it. Men, for example, who demonstrate hypermasculinity do so through their exploitation of women, violence towards other men, and their enjoyment of excessive risk taking (Karp, 2010: 65).

Richard Pitt and George Sanders propose that hypermasculinity, as a result of being subordinate to phallic masculinity, actually refers to the marginalised and stereotyped male identities across sexuality, race and class (Pitt & Sanders, 2010: 34). A poor, jobless male youth, for example, as a result of not being financially successful, might gain feelings of power by excessively displaying his masculinity through aggressive sexism and violence (Karp, 2010: 65). However, the image of hypermasculinity does not secure one's access to the realms of phallic masculinity, and in and of itself it can also be destabilising. If phallic masculinity is the ideal representation of masculine identity then few bodies will be able to achieve this. Some bodies will 'suffer' from being too feminine, whereas others, those demonstrating hypermasculinity, present an excess of corporeality that threatens the coherence of masculinity because it can lead to emasculation (Hekman, 2013: 61).

Thus, hypermasculinity falls victim to an excess of visual signification because those who perform it are seen to try too hard to secure the characteristics, behaviours and traits of phallic masculinity. Take for example Judith Roof's (2014) reading of Arnold Schwarzenegger in his films of the 1980s. He is not just a muscleman, he's a muscleman that wears motorcycle boots, leather pants and dark sunglasses, rides a Harley Davidson, wields a massive gun and smokes a cigar; he is a simulacrum of masculinity and maleness that



bears no relation to any reality (Roof, 2014: 83). Some scholars have argued that this simulacrum has been adopted by gay communities as a tactic to parody, criticise and ironise normative masculinity because it is an image that can never be attained (Kiley, 1998: 334). However, the subversive potential for hypermasculinity is doubtful in this context as it has a tendency to idealise the same representations of masculinity that persecute gay culture (Wood, 2004: 51).

It is because of hypermasculinity's ability to simultaneously signify and challenge masculine ideology that makes it useful in helping to define muscular masculinity. The demonstration of hypermasculinity is about restoring its characteristics, behaviours and traits into the performance space as a way of parodying what a normative masculine identity rejects in order to constitute itself. Within the focus of this thesis, the term parody is not meant to be taken as it is in common parlance; it does not signify the process of mocking hypermasculinity and its relationship to the male body. Instead, the term *para* in parody is an Ancient Greek prefix meaning counter and against, as well as to be near or beside (Hutcheon, 1986–1987: 185). In the work that I define as muscular masculinity, these artists ironically pull close the characteristics and behaviours of hypermasculinity so as to foreground and comment upon an ideological, social and historical critical discourse. Therefore, hypermasculinity is performed in these works to demonstrate its affect on other genders and to reveal itself as an embodied social construction.

Amelia Jones has explored the destabilising potential of hypermasculinity and its relationship to body art in her book *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998) and her earlier article *Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their*

*masculinities* (1994). In both texts, she identifies how by performing the phallus male artists can expose the gap between masculine identity and the body and in turn challenge representations of masculinity. Jones (1994) attributes her term phallic dis/play to denote the playing of the phallus as a way of exploiting masculine authority and/or the 'display of the penis to its potentially deconstructive ends' (Jones, 1994: 547).

Using this to read Robert Morris' (1974) self-constructed image on a Castelli/Sonnabend Gallery poster from 1974, Jones' (1994) describes how Morris destabilises normative representations of masculine ideology through his performance of hypermasculinity (Jones, 1994: 555). Photographed with a GI Helmet, dark sunglasses, bare oily pecs and bulging arms Morris seems to perform, and to some extent literalise, the phallic/penis conflation. Yet the control and power associated with the phallus, and in turn this image, disappears as a result of him adopting excessive attributes of different types of masculinities. Not just presented as a symbol of power, as associated with the military, or even as a working-class tough guy, Jones also attributes Morris' image to sadomasochistic garb, which, as noted above, signals 'the dangerous marginality of gay male subjectivity' (Jones, 1994: 556). Through Jones' reading of phallic dis/play, Morris can be seen to perform the symbolic castration of the male body from masculine ideology, for he reveals his body as performing in excess of the symbolic traits of masculinity.

The issue that I wish to raise here with regards to Jones' argument is that castration has to occur for the subject to have access to the symbolic realm (Thomas, 2008: 31). In his outline of the mirror stage, Lacan argues that in order for the infant to earn subjectivity she must first recognise the gap between

her body and the imago. It is this moment that rips her away from the undifferentiated realm of the real in the maternal body, as a way of gaining access to the symbolic space of paternal law (Lacan, 2001: 6). Even secondary castration is about continually moving the subject into the symbolic, for once again she has to recognise her lack in order to want the phallus (Lacan, 2001a: 317). For the masculine subject castration is a horrific but necessary problem, this is because to realise that there is a gap between their body and normative masculine ideology means that the male subject has to find another way of closing that gap down.

### **1.1.3: The Objet Petit a**

As a trope of performance, muscular masculinity does destabilise normative masculine ideology by demonstrating a deconstruction of hypermasculinity, although it is not just about unveiling the phallus to expose the gap between identity and the body. Muscular masculinity is concerned with whatever is in the gap in the first place that requires the phallus to cover it up, thus making the subject feel whole. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan refers to this object as the *Objet petit a*, that being the object that the subject desires, but can never have because it exists outside of any linguistic signification. It resides in the gaps that the phallus cannot fill, for as Alan Sheridan notes: 'the 'a' in question stands for '*autre*' (other) [...]. The '*petit a*' (small 'a') differentiates the object from (while relating to it) the '*Autre*' or '*grand Autre*' (the capitalized (*sic*) 'Other') (Sheridan, 1998: 282). The objet petit a is a reminder to the subject that language is always Other than them.

The term "capitalized Other" has two meanings that are interrelated. The first comes from the world of discourse that every child is born into, this is the

linguistic world that their parents have crafted for them, from the name that they have chosen for that child, to the room that they have decorated for her. Importantly though this world is also the world created by their parents before them, and their parents before them, and so on. It is because of this that the subject is always different from the world that helps to define them (Fink, 1995: 3). This foreignness is also replicated in the subject's relationship with other people, for "I" can never fully know the intimate experiences of Others even if they do try to describe them (Lacan, 1998b: 7–8). The objet petit a in both of these instances then is the object that exists within the subject but which cannot be accurately articulated, for example, visceral experiences or gut instincts. Lacan's example in *On Jouissance* is useful in understanding this concept, for the objet petit a exists in the frustration that the masculine subject experiences when not knowing what exactly it is about the feminine phallic object that he desires. All he knows is that there is something, but he cannot put his finger on it (Lacan, 1998: 268).

The concept of Otherness, when placed into a socio-political context, offers a more nuanced reading, for it becomes about having qualities of difference that are unrecognisable to a particular group identity. In this respect, the objet petit a becomes misperceived as an obstacle because while the Other is like the subject in that they can be categorised as human, there is something about them that is not quite right. This might be with regards to what the body looks like, what it does, or what they do. As Žižek notes those defined as Other have a 'strange glint', or a 'tiny feature, [that] transubstantiates its bearer from human into alien' (Žizek, 2011: 67). The objet petit a in this context is not so much a word constantly on the edge of the subject's lips (Lacan, 1998: 267), as

it may be better described as what the subject finds difficult to swallow (Lacan, 1998: 270).

With regards to demonstrations of hypermasculinity in a social context, the objet petit a might go some way to explaining why hypermasculinity is being performed in the first place. Located in the gap between the body and identity the objet petit a becomes an obstacle for the masculine subject because it exceeds symbolic signification, it represents part of his body that he cannot define or control. I argue that it is because of the ambiguity and 'unknowability' associated with his body that a sense of not-quite-rightness is experienced by the male subject in relation to the culturally required traits of normative masculinity. The point here is that the gap that the phallus covers exposes the male subject's inability to achieve the patriarchal requirements for masculinity because their body offers signification that is surplus to hegemonic needs. Therefore, to combat those experiences of not-quite-rightness the masculine subject overcompensates in their identification with masculine ideology through demonstrations of power and control.

#### **1.1.4: The Abject Body**

In performances of muscular masculinity, the image of hypermasculinity is destabilised through its exposure of an objet petit a, but to achieve this, the male artist first has to be seen to endure the abject. In her book *Powers of Horror* (1982) Kristeva articulates the abject as being anything that has been ejected from the self, however rather than being abolished altogether, the abject sits at the margins of our identities and refuses to be assimilated by the subject. In doing so it acts as a primer to the subject's culture, it is a reminder to not go any further, it is a safeguard to the understanding of self (Kristeva, 1982: 3). In

addition to constituting the subject's perception of self, the abject also has the power to draw them to the point where meaning collapses, where binary oppositions of subject/object blur (Kristeva, 1982: 2). To remain in this state for too long means the subject is at risk of becoming continually demarcated, where the boundaries that help to define "I" from other are constantly being moved (Kristeva, 1982: 9). One of the defining features of the abject then is its ambiguity.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four all extend upon the abject metaphor, but in this chapter the focus is placed on Kristeva's interest in the displacement of organic material. Much of her opening chapter in *Powers of Horror* (1982) outlines how the body and its materiality can also be seen as examples of the abject. Her point being, as Arya notes, that the natural body with all its seepages and flows 'conveys the conflict between our organic bodies, which operate according to the laws of nature, and our desired cultural projections of the body' (Arya, 2014: 57). Although, as hypermasculinity demonstrates the abject body does not mean that all corporeality is completely rejected from the construction of masculine identity. Muscles, the penis, functional body parts, skin, and the face are all aspects of the male body that may help to form a normative masculine identity. However, as Chapter Three of this thesis explains, even these body parts are not completely safe from the anxiety caused by the abject.

What causes anxiety in the abject is the in-between states of the body and those things that pass between them. Bodily fluids and waste such as blood, urine, and spittle are abject because they transcend the boundaries of inside/outside and make explicit the permeable body (Kristeva, 1982: 4). Thus,

it is not deceased bodies that are despised, but rather it is the healthy and flowing body that is scrutinised (Arya, 2014a: 60); this is because the abject reminds us that waste is literally part of us. With particular emphasis on faeces and the corpse, the abject acts as a reminder that we are dying subjects, that we will all decay and become that same waste that we reject. (Kristeva, 1982: 3). As such, the power of the abject is in its ability for it to confuse the boundaries of self and object, between what matters and what is matter.

One of the things that fascinates Elizabeth Grosz (1994) about Kristeva's (1982) theory of the abject is the way that it links the lived experience of the body with its social, cultural specific meanings, and how the body is selectively marked as a result (Grosz, 1994:192). While all bodily fluids are abject, as Mary Douglas (2002) points out, not all offer the same level of pollution. Douglas argues that the thick rheum that oozes from the nose is more offensive than fast running tears. This is because tears are pre-empted by the symbolism of washing, and as such she asks how can they pollute when they cleanse? (Douglas, 2002: 154–155). Whilst for the purpose of this chapter Mary Douglas's observation seems appropriate, it is worth noting that Chapter Three proposes that things become abject as a result of their contextual displacement. Following this point, while the tears of a spurned woman might evoke poetry, those of a hysterical man might still be considered as abject.

Leaving this last point aside for a moment, like Douglas (2002), Kristeva (1982) also recognises levels of abjection associated with the body. She does this to the extent that menstrual blood and excrement are seen by Kristeva to cause so much disgust and anxiety that they are used in *Powers of Horror* as metaphors for the way other abject-objects affect our social understanding of

self (Kristeva, 1982: 71). This is not to suggest, as Douglas (2002) does, that the body can be seen as a prototype for society or vice-versa (Kristeva, 1982: 66). Instead, what Kristeva seems to be arguing is that our understanding of our bodies affects the way society affects our bodies, and, similarly, the way that we understand social laws and behaviours also affect our understanding of our bodies. This dual movement between the body and symbolic (which is made more explicit in the next chapter) means that the West's lack of acceptance to marginalised identities is based on them being both corporeally ambiguous and a challenge to the division between self and other.

Therefore, menstrual blood can be used as a metaphor because it is one element that culturally defines women from men, not just because it is indicative of waste, but also because it emphasises the vagina, the cultural site of reproductive penetration. Metaphorically speaking, menstrual blood symbolises danger from within and could refer to the collapsing of gender boundaries. Conversely, excrement can be used as a metaphor for danger ensuing from the outside. This is because excrement is ejected from us and is experienced as a foreign object. The idea of the foreign body, says Rina Ayra, 'plays with our fears about the boundaries of the body and about how [...] we want to discard anything that is foreign or harmful to the body' (Ayra, 2014: 13). Excrement then might act as a metaphor for homosexuality or the heteronormative male fear of penetration. Similarly, it might also come to represent the refugee or the body that illegally crosses the border into our land.

If hypermasculinity and phallic masculinity are about strength, power, control and coherence, then to be seen as a leaky body, and/or to allow for receptivity by being penetrable, passive and vulnerable is to be considered as



abject when compared to normativity (Hekman, 2013: 61). The irony behind this, as Chapter Three identifies, is that all bodies leak and all bodies are penetrable including male ones, it is just that the abject quality of their bodily fluids are displaced onto the bodies of others. What this demonstrates is that abject bodies are seen to matter less than normative ones, because normative bodies have materialised over time as stable (Butler, 2011: 7).

As such, it might be considered a transgressive act for a subject associated with normativity, one who is culturally considered as clean and proper, to make explicit their abject body. Yet, in the representations of muscular masculinity demonstrated in the works of Stuart Brisley, Gilbert and George and Ron Athey this is not strictly the case. Instead, their excessive endurance of the abject may also be seen as the demonstration of coherence. Rather than being seen as leaky, penetrable and therefore fragmented, the hypermasculine body demonstrates normative masculinity's ability to withstand the abject, to not be affected by it, and to retain a coherent masculine identity. In short, the abject is used in this way to constitute a normative identity (Walsh, 2011: 178).

At the same time, while hypermasculinity, and phallic masculinity by extension, are demonstrable of strength, power and control, these can only ever be a fiction (Jones, 1994: 547). To exaggeratedly affect the possession of the phallus, as is demonstrable in muscular masculinity, means that both forms of masculinity run the risk of exposing the phallic masquerade (Walsh, 2011: 61). In this sense, to exaggeratedly perform masculinity as phallic, in the form of being powerful, in control, and coherent, those same characteristics, behaviours and traits are also revealed as not being inherent to normative male identities.

Instead, what is revealed is the reason why that phallus was employed in the first place. In my articulation of muscular masculinity, I argue that a culturally constructed male corporeal fear is what is revealed as the objet petit a.

## **1.2: '180 Hours - Work for Two People'**

Performed in 1978, at the Acme Gallery London, *180 Hours - Work for Two People* was a performance by Stuart Brisley that divided a gallery space in two; downstairs lived the artist named "A", whereas "B", the bureaucrat, lived upstairs. Seen by Brisley as extensions of himself, "A" was the creative part of his identity, and "B" was the dominant and loud persona that gave "A" the wage (Roberts, 1981: 13). Brisley became "A" or "B" during the 180 hours duration by walking into either gallery, which were connected by a stairway. Whilst the exact identity of the characters and the location they occupied were nondescript, the way they behaved, specifically the way "B" treated "A", suggested that the performance was about the effects of power on the body (Newman & Davies, 2002: 10). In an interview with John Roberts, Brisley offers a description of "B" as loving order, hating nature and indulgence, and needing to be in control (Brisley & Roberts, 1981: 155). "B" is a disciplinarian both in the relationship to himself and through the continuous surveillance of "A", as such throughout the performance he works towards a constant need for power. As Roberts notes '[h]e is the dominant one, he is the one who makes a hole in the floorboards of his space so as he can drop food and refuse into A's space' (Roberts, 1981: 13).

### **1.2.1: Performing Gendered Identities**

As suggested by Roberts, the purpose of *180 Hours – Work for Two People* was to demonstrate in 'a visual and imaginary way how the production

of knowledge [...] is coexistent with the exercising of power' (Roberts, 1981: 13). In light of this Michael Newman and Erica Davies suggest that 'where Brisley's work has specific political references, they are most often towards class politics, modes of labour and the economy of art, rather than to gender' (Newman & Davies, 2002: 8). In some respects I can see this position, the art institution as performed by the bureaucrat "B" is attempting to control and survey the creative artist, "A". In this respect, the performance does act as a commentary on the commodification of art practice, which reflects the reasons why Brisley transitioned from sculpture and installations in the first place (Brisley & Roberts, 1981:149).

Having said this though the politics of gender exist in more spaces than just the body and its relationship to social roles. As John MacInnes argues, the ideological legacy of patriarchy emphasises not just the material inequality between men and women, but also the continued dominance of men in the public sphere, specifically in politics (MacInnes, 2004: 315). It is possible then to read Brisley's performance in *180 Hours – Work for Two People* as one that reinstates a hegemonic representation of masculinity. 'B' demonstrates his control and power over 'A' in a manner that is not too dissimilar to my example of John McClane in the introduction of this chapter. The difference being, the domination that 'B' has over another man is not demonstrated through physical violence, but through his command of language. He might then be seen as performing phallic masculinity rather than the hypermasculine.

I see Brisley's performances of 'A' and 'B' as being more complex than the reproduction of hegemonic masculine qualities into the performance space though, for I argue that *180 Hours – Work for Two People* can be read as the

personification of muscular masculinity. The idea of personification is raised by Paul Overy who describes how Brisley's use of characters in *180 Hours – Work for Two People* moves him closer to theatre than his other performances have done in the past (Overy, n.d: 8). This 'theatricality' is also echoed by John Roberts who notes that this particular performance has the remnants of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* in it (Roberts, 1981: 13). However, whilst the notion of characters in performance art may have been seen as new and revolutionary at the time, with the benefit of hindsight it is possible to locate a lineage of artists that have adopted characters as part of their work.

In the 1970s and 1980s, artists such as Cindy Sherman and Sherman Fleming created characters as a type of political weapon used to highlight how dominant discourse articulates Othered identities. In her *Untitled Film Series* (Sherman, 1977–1980), Sherman performed the many stereotypes associated with being female; the femme fatale, the mother, or the librarian amongst many others. According to Judith Williams, the purpose of attempting to make explicit so many characters was to undermine the way normativity fixes images of women in accordance to cultural desires (Williams, 1986: 92). Similarly, Sherman Fleming's ironic alternate persona RODFORCE was designed to condense media representations of black men into a phallic personification (Warr, 2006: 150–151). Potentially being described as an endurance artist in the 1980s, as RODFORCE Fleming would engage in practices that pushed his body to its limits. The emphasis on his body was to demonstrate it as the material that bears the weight of cultural demons associated with black male identities (Carr, 2012: 170).

Sherman's and Fleming's performances focussed on the restoration of different behaviours, characteristics and traits associated with their stereotyped identities. As a result, we may read both artists as attempting to make explicit the ways in which performed stereotypes are naturalised on different bodies. As Jayne Wark notes '[t]he goal of such works was not to escape or provide alternatives [...] but to interrupt their flow, to diagnose and reveal their mechanisms, and thus to play a role in liberating people from the institutions that control their lives' (Wark, 2006: 193). However, the interruption of Sherman's photographs is not about demonstrating the stability of female identification, but rather it's about illustrating its instability. Sherman is able to achieve this by performing the many images of the culturally constructed female identity (Phelan, 1993: 62). This position is echoed by Sherman herself who argued that her photographs were never of her, her aim was to make individuals recognise themselves in her (Ioan, 2011: 162). In doing so, Sherman points out that the unified conception of identity is torn apart and that the female subject is fragmented.

Sherman's photographs are a useful counterpoint to Brisley's performance *180 Hours – Work for Two People* for what becomes apparent when you compare the two is how differently male subjectivity is performed to female. While Sherman is able to identify and present 69 stills that depict images of different 'types' of women, Brisley performs a generic image of male subjectivity, which re-enforces the coherence and autonomy of masculine identity. This singularity of masculinity is further emphasised through Brisley's choice to perform two separate characters, which I do not read as being two different expressions of masculine identities, rather I see them as two parts of

one whole; male corporeality and masculine identity. The qualities of "B" for example are described as possessing, dominance, control, hating nature and indulgence, all of which seem to point towards the performance of a hypermasculine identity. Whereas "A" is the silent and indulgent part that is surplus to the signification of a normative masculine identity and thus requires controlling. It is for this reason that I believe it is possible to see how muscular masculinity starts to make itself present in the space.

### **1.2.2: The Performance of Muscular Masculinity**

I read Brisley's performances of "A" and "B" as exploring the power dynamics between male corporeality and masculine identity. Not only in the way that he divides the space to become indicative of the mind/body dualism of the West, which promotes rational thinking over bodily experience; a position that is further emphasised by the evacuation of "B's" excrement into "A's" space through the hole in the floor. I also see him as exploring the anxiety and shame that exudes from the potential 'infection' of masculine identity by the visceral male body. It is this particular aspect of Brisley's performance that I argue is indicative of the objet petit a, and in turn destabilises the representation of normative masculinity as characterised through "B".

If Brisley's characters in *180 Hours – Work for Two People* can be seen to perform either male corporeality or hypermasculinity, I propose that the piece starts to replicate Lacan's phallus (2001a). Not only does the corporeal entity inhabiting the bottom floor gallery not speak, but the hypermasculine controlling character resides hierarchically in the top half of the gallery, making demands on "A" through the hole in the floor. Based on the characters, the spaces that they reside in may be read as the two domains that the phallus divides, the

bottom being indicative of the 'Real', and the top being the domain of the symbolic. The Real is a domain filled with the experiences of the body without zones, subdivisions, or localised highs. It is an undifferentiated fabric that has no gaps to define it (Fink, 1997: 24). When subjectivity occurs, the symbolic cuts up the Real, creating divisions between distinguishable entities, and leaving 'the rest to rest' (Fink, 1997: 24). By cancelling out the Real, the Symbolic creates a 'reality' for the subject to exist within, but what cannot be said in that reality by the subject must be excluded from it.

In this reimagining of Brisley's work, the gallery floor/ceiling becomes the phallic bar that separates the different realms, whereas its gap becomes the place where the objet petit a resides. Because Brisley performs both characters, his movement between the two zones unveils the phallic bar as being no more than an architectural divide. This unveiling of the phallus challenges the masculine representation of "B" because the Real emerges in the symbolic through those things that are not yet symbolised, or that resist signification (Fink, 1997: 25). In this moment "B" is forced to recognise that "A", the very thing for him that exceeds the symbolic, is part of him, which acts as a reminder of his alienation from language. One might argue here that Brisley is performing the castrating affect of the subject who realises that their body does not meet the demands of hypermasculinity.

However, I also read "B" as attempting to overcome his castration through the constant monitoring of "A", and the obsessive maintenance of his clean and proper body through the organisation of his excrement. This routine is revealing, for the repetitive tasks of removing bodily waste from his space, and constantly attempting to monitor where "A" has gone, becomes indicative of

what Mary Douglas describes as secular rituals for purification (Douglas, 2002: 4). The point of these rituals of abjection is that they bring into being the very thing that they are trying to abject so it can be purged from the body (Kristeva, 1982: 17). In order for "B" to be seen as being in control of his body, he must first allow the abject to manifest through the vocal reminder that "A" has vanished. Furthermore, he has to demonstrate his ability to produce excrement in order to demonstrate his ability to control it and in turn eject it from his space.

What seems to be occurring through "B's" never ending enactment of rituals is a performance of male corporeal anxiety. This struggle occurs because in order for "B" to remind himself that he is not abject he has to check by bringing back the very thing that he hates, but it is because of his checking that his actions suggest to me that he thinks that he might also be abject. I argue that we might see this as the very thing that is enabling hypermasculinity to exist, that is the fear that the abject may infect the clean and proper image of his masculine identity. I say this because I read "B's" actions in a similar manner to the way that Calvin Thomas describes men's relationships to their bodies in the West: as 'an anxious masculine relationship to the male body, to the visibility of that body, the traverse of its boundaries, the representability of its products, the corporeal conditions of male subjectivity[...]' (Thomas, 1996: 15).

The performance of these characters in *180 Hours - Work for Two People* affords me the opportunity to read Brisley as performing what I have come to call muscular masculinity. In this performance, Brisley sets up through "A" and "B" the dualistic logic of the West that separates the visceral aspects of male corporeality from masculine identity. His unveiling of the phallus has



potentially destabilising effects because it exposes the relationship between those different sides of the binary and allows them to bleed. The problem with this reading though is that whilst there will always be traces of the other in each space, "B" overcomes this issue by demonstrating more control and more power over his body as the logic of the phallus might suggest he would. However, it is in his ritualistic actions of cleaning and monitoring that for me is most destabilising. This is because in performing these actions Brisley ends up playing out a male corporeal anxiety that is a constant reminder for the male subject that they do not have the ability to achieve the hegemonic ideals. It is the recognition of this shame and anxiety in the male subject that I argue is at the crux of the performance trope muscular masculinity.

### **1.3: Gilbert and George Performing Horrific Pleasures of the Male Body**

While Stuart Brisley exposes a masculine corporeal anxiety in *180 Hours – Work for Two People* through the performance of his character "B", Gilbert and George perform their spectator's potential anxiety. Starting with their live performance works I identify a 'double uncanny turn' that enables the artists to highlight the contradictory experiences of the male body in relation to masculine identity. We might see this as being similar to the unveiling of the phallus that was enacted by Brisley by moving between the different gallery spaces. However, I argue that the work of Gilbert and George becomes indicative of muscular masculinity when it becomes possible to identify the aesthetic of their live performances in their picture *Eight Shits* (Prousch & Passmore 1994). By

locating their bodies next to enlarged images of their bodily waste, I outline how the artists also perform the potential horrific pleasures of the male body.

### **1.3.1: The Uncanny in the Performance of Hypermasculinity**

Gilbert and George are well known for their careful and controlled public presentation of their image, which as a performance was established in 1969 under their first manifesto *Laws of Sculptures*. Out of the four commandments contained within the manifesto, the first states: 'Always be smartly dressed, well groomed and friendly, polite and in complete control' (Gilbert and George, 2011). Curiously, their public persona differed dramatically from artistic and cultural fashioning at that time. In Britain during the 1960s and 1970s, many artists attempted to reject the tightly controlled presentation of self that was defined by the 1950s. Rather than wearing formal suits and observing acceptable forms of etiquette, these decades gave way to 'rebel' culture where fashion, music and art allowed for a greater expression of self. In reaction to this cultural climate Gilbert and George self-consciously styled themselves in an Edwardian manner (Saurisse, 2013: 104). Always dressed in suits that compliment each other, but are never entirely the same, they refer to these as their 'responsibility suits', which aimed to eliminate issues of choice and vanity so they could focus on making art (Çakırlar, 2011: 96). This was not just a sartorial choice, but also one that they applied to the construction of their identities and subsequently their bodies.

Over the last forty-six years, Gilbert and George have continued to demonstrate high levels of rigidity, control and coherence in order to maintain their identity as 'living sculptures'. Referencing their training at art college, the term 'living sculptures' also refers to their choice of blurring life and art by never

deviating from their performance in public where they always adopted a contrived and affected posture (Saurisse, 2013:107). Always formal, reserved, emotionally resistant and mirroring each other's body language, in many respects this level of control might be considered indicative of hypermasculinity. Yet their use of hyperbolic formal manners and style exposes the artificiality of their public identity (Saurisse, 2013:108). When watching them mirror each other's postures almost exactly, finishing off each other sentences, agreeing on almost everything, and sounding the same, I begin to feel uncomfortable. The experience of this discomfort is as a result of them attempting to provide 'some delicate way of seeing an aspect of life [with regards to] what a person is or is not' (Dutt & Gilbert and George, 2004: 38). I think they achieve this by performing an uncanny masculine identity.

Sigmund Freud describes the uncanny as being 'that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar' (Freud, 1971: 219). It is the manifestation of what is repressed by the subject in something that is familiar, or, it can also be something strange that at its core has something ordinary about it. Kristeva also suggests that there is an uncanniness about the abject 'which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome' (Kristeva, 1982: 4). For Freud, the uncanny can be identified in three main categories: those things that relate to the double; castration anxieties regarding the fear of female genitalia or dismembered limbs; the feeling associated with a familiar or unfamiliar place (Creed, 2007: 53). Rosalind Minsky considers in her discussion of uncanny literature, that when faced with social norms art can reveal certain knowledge about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and

unconscious universe. This is because it redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid (Minsky, 1996: 259).

One explanation into the workings of the uncanny that Freud offers forward is that it destroys the distinction between imagination and reality (Freud, 1971: 244). In Lacan's articulation of the realms occupied by subjectivity, the real, as discussed earlier through Brisley's work, is associated with the bodily drives that exceed signification, whereas the imaginary has a double meaning, which is drawn from the mirror stage (Lacan, 2001c). Imaginary refers to the moment where the child sees her image in the mirror for the first time and in turn perceives herself as a unified self-image. At the same time, this image is also alien to her because it is not indicative of the fluidity and fragmentation experienced with the body (Lacan, 2001: 3–4). In this respect, imaginary means both image and imagination, and if a coherent masculine identity can be seen in this way then what becomes uncanny about Gilbert and George is their ability to create an illusion where the symbols of an imaginary masculine image masks the fluidity of the male body. The feeling of uncanniness manifests because whilst a normative masculinity feels familiar, the heavy censoring of abstract qualities like emotion, or tiny characteristics that define individuals, makes it feel unfamiliar.

By bringing the repressed body to the surface as a result of exposing the uncanny, a new uncanny turn appears with a focus on corporeality. To achieve the well-rehearsed identity of Gilbert and George a disciplining of the body needs to occur. As such their performances raise questions about how intimate two men have to be in order to achieve the accuracy required in their work (Saurisse, 2013: 111). This suggests that in order for these two men to perform

the same identity there has to be an understanding of each other that is based on more than simple observation. They have to be in close proximity together for a significant amount of time, they have to know each other's body, its mannerism, and its production of meaning intimately. Their artworks then engage with the norms of masculinity while accommodating the uncanny presence of the artists' homosexual, and, therefore, abject bodies (Çakırlar, 2011: 89).

It is important to note that this unfamiliarity does not cause abjection, for Kristeva argues that abjection is distinctly different from uncanniness because it is more violent and does not recognise similarity (Kristeva, 1982: 5). Instead we may read Gilbert and George's live performances as the unveiling of the phallus, for, in following Amelia Jones' reading of Robert Morris, Gilbert and George 'highlight areas of contradiction in masculinity, "opening up", as it were, areas of rupture and penetrability [...]' (Jones, 1998: 115). The phallus is revealed in Gilbert and George's performances because they expose, through the uncanny, the gaps in the symbolic traits of their identity where multiple significations can occur. Not only do they reveal the importance of the body in the construction of masculinity, but also that the policing of that body can result in an overinvestment of male corporeality. To open up the gaps as a result of contradicting signification then is to make one's masculine identity vulnerable, fluid and penetrable, which is explored further in Chapter Three. However, this vulnerability is not what I think the *objet petit a* is in their oeuvre. Where it may be found is in the relationship between Gilbert and George's live performances and their picture series *Naked Shit Pictures* (1994).

### 1.3.2: Performing Abject Pleasures

In the highly saturated prints of *Naked Shit Pictures*, the photographs of Gilbert and George are placed alongside enlarged images of their own bodily fluids and waste. One picture that I find most striking in this series is *Eight Shits* (1994). Here the artists are photographed naked with their white pants around their ankles against a bright blue background. Superimposed onto the picture are six enlarged images of well-formed excrement; standing next to them George faces the viewer looking shocked or stunned as Gilbert, with hands on his hips and his leg bent, raises his eyebrows as if slightly embarrassed. Both look like they have been caught in the act of expelling their faeces; they are literally, as the common dictum states, caught with their pants down. These slightly awkward and overly stylised positions seem to echo the overly conservative identity they perform in their live works. I believe that these two separate mediums work together to create a narrative of normative masculinity similar to that of Brisley in *180 Hours – Work for Two People*. That is, the calm, formal, and well-considered people in their live works end up performing an anxiety associated with masculine corporeality in *Eight Shits*.

In *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes describes two aspects of the photograph, which can be applied to Gilbert and George's picture as a way of understanding how muscular masculinity is performed by them. The first is the *studium*, which is the way that the artist constructs their image (Barthes, 1981: 26). This is the intention of the artist presented graphically, which is then interpreted by the spectators who see the ideas and intentions in the work. Barthes argues that culture is important in the construction of the *studium* for it is knowledge of one's culture that allows for a shared body of information to be

communicated (Barthes, 1981: 25). In relation to *Eight Shits*, and considering their live practice, Gilbert and George communicate the relationship between men, male bodies and masculinity. The horror captured on their faces and the embarrassment that is present in their posture, whilst being positioned next to those massive shits, inscribes into that image a corporeal anxiety about the leaky male body.

However, there is also something not quite right about these poses, something uncanny in the way that Gilbert and George hold themselves that seems in excess to the composition of the work. Barthes describes a break in the studium, which he refers to as the *punctum* the element of a photograph that pricks and marks, or stings and cuts a little hole into the spectator (Barthes, 1981: 27). In *Mythologies*, originally published in 1972, Barthes locates in Greta Garbo and Charlie Chaplin the same punctum, which he describes as a flour-white complexion and dark vegetation for eyes (Barthes, 1993: 56). The punctum is the thing that shoots out at the spectator and makes a mark, which disrupts the studium through the process of making new interpretations, links or points (Barthes, 1981: 27). As Bert O'States notes, 'who has ever thought of Charlie Chaplin's eyes in this way, yet who does not instantly see the "connection"' (O'States, 1992: 34).

The punctum that emerges in *Eight Shits* for me is the thing that allows the spectator to move through the performed symbolic codes of masculinity and see their self, rather than just Gilbert and George. In this picture, there is a sense that they are making their bodies feel awkward to look at by deliberately sculpting them into those positions. As if making a mockery of the masculine fear of male corporeality they melodramatically perform shock or feign anxiety

and it is here that it becomes clear to me that those artists do not fear male corporeality at all. Instead, the evidence of shame and anxiety that I am searching for on those bodies is performatively thrown back at me. As a spectator I start to consider why I am searching for shame in the first place and what this might suggest about me.

This anxiety is only fleeting though, as the ridiculousness of those shits in relation to Gilbert and George makes me laugh, a moment which Cüneyt Çakırlar refers to as an 'aesthetics of shame', where shame ricochets in the self and converts to joy (Çakırlar, 2011: 97). This aesthetic occurs because of the humorous ways in which they play with the signification of the male body. In the first instance, there are only six shits on the image, whilst the title suggests that the other two might be Gilbert and George. As a result of their mocking we might consider them as shits, and furthermore, they probably don't give a shit either. There is also the possibility that they are quite literally desperate for a shit, or that they are scared shitless as a result of the monstrous faeces that share the space with them.

Considering the relationship between their live performances and *Eight Shits* I read Gilbert and George as performing Kristeva's now well-cited quote: 'I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*' (Kristeva, 1982: 3). In the picture, Gilbert and George potentially signify characteristics, behaviours and traits that might be aligned with normative masculinity, for example, nonchalance and aggression in the form of mocking their spectator. At the same time, that signification is confused because they also perform the very characteristics that are rejected from patriarchal discourse, such as being aligned with corporeality, or being seen to be scared. By



operating within the in-between space of these signs they demonstrate the male's ability of 'becoming' the very thing that masculinity aims to reject.

What causes me most pleasure though in *Eight Shits* is the way Gilbert and George link the penis/phallus conflation with faeces. The six images of excrement are phallic because, and to adapt Lacan's own description, they are turgid like a bar or rod, they act as copula between the inside of the body and the outside, and furthermore as demonstrated above, they can also represent the image of vital flow with reference to the production of meaning (Aydemir, 2007: 41–44). Compared to this Gilbert and George's own flaccid penises simply do not stand up. Moreover, if the penis references the phallus, which is depicted here as shit, through a process of deferral the penis becomes linked to the anus, an orifice which is buried deep underneath the masculine ideal (Phelan, 1997: 81). Normative masculinity hides the male anus, not just because it leaks and is considered dirty, but because it is associated with penetrable and subsequently pleasurable potential (Waldby, 2002: 272). As such, rather than shit, these images become penises stained with shit, which simultaneously signifies the anxiety regarding the vulnerability of the male body and the potentially penetrable joy (if not pleasure) associated with it.

#### **1.4: Troubling Muscular Masculinity Through Ron Athey**

Nevertheless, the destabilisation that muscular masculinity offers is by no means secure, for as Stuart Brisley and Gilbert and George make evident, a challenge only occurs as a result of performing a normative identity first. As such, whilst challenging masculine ideologies by exposing male corporeal anxiety those artists re-inscribe the image of hypermasculinity into the

performance space. As Chris Jenks notes: 'transgressive behaviour does not deny limits or boundaries, rather it exceeds them and thus completes them [...]. The transgression is a component of the rule' (Jenks, 2003: 7). Furthermore, what becomes evident is that there is no challenge to the artist's masculine identity in muscular masculinity. This is because they perform the anxiety of someone else, either a character's as with Brisley or the spectator's, as with Gilbert and George. The result of this is that whilst it allows them to challenge masculinity discursively, it keeps their identities centralised, and in respect to Gilbert and George, clean and proper. Even artists such as Ron Athey who have been celebrated as transgressing normative ideology can still centralise the masculine subject as a result of his explicit abject autobiography.

#### **1.4.1: Centralising the Abject Self in Performance**

Since the 1990s Ron Athey's performances, which involve auto-penetration, self-mutilation and the demonstration of alternative sex practices, have been hugely influential particularly in Europe. Part of Athey's influence has been because both his aesthetic and content directly challenge dominant assumptions about the body, subjectivity, sexuality, and gender. Nowhere is this more evident than in his 1994 contribution to the US *Culture Wars*<sup>9</sup> where his performance *Human Printing Press*, which he performed with Divinity Fudge at the Walker Centre, in Minnesota, caused national controversy. The now well-documented moment in international Performance Art consisted of Athey making cuts into Fudge's back with a scalpel. As Fudge's blood appeared on his wounded body, Athey blotted it with absorbent towels where assistants then

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<sup>9</sup> Dominic Johnson notes that Culture Wars were seven years of heightened political censure of challenging art by right-wing American Conservative senates between 1989 and 1996 (Johnson, 2013: 66).

attached them to taught lines that passed over the audience (Johnson, 2013: 66).

Arguably, the reason why Athey's performances caused so much controversy then, and are still challenging to watch now, is because his sadomasochistic rituals and religious overtones elevates his bloody body in order to attack the fixity of heteronormative behaviour, relations and subjectivity. His 'apocalyptic performances' and violation of bodily boundaries are a nightmare for those who are afraid of transgression (Stephanou, 2011: 412). In reference to *The Human Printing Press*, the blood caused so much national<sup>10</sup> concern not just because of the potential for it to be diseased with the HIV infection, but also because it was diseased, symbolically, with the threat of homosexuality. We might, because of this, read his carnal openings, in the form of cuts and penetration, as a challenge to heterosexual, medical and religious parameters, primarily because it plays out the heterosexual and patriarchal fear of being penetrated (Gallego, 2014: 74).

In addition to penetrating his body with scalpels, surgical staples, and hypodermic needles, Athey also penetrates his own orifices. In *Solar Anus* (1998), he engages in two forms of self-penetration, in one scene a never-ending string of pearls are pulled out from his rectum. In the second scene, he penetrates his tattooed anus with dildos attached to red high heel shoes, in a manner that animates Monlier's *Mon fétiche des jamba*s (1966). For Athey auto-penetration of his anus articulates an expression of defiance because, as a homosexual weapon, it is a site of pleasure and is symbolically associated in

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<sup>10</sup> Whilst Athey's performance did cause national concern and resulted in a reduction in funding from the NEA, the impact of Athey's performance was felt internationally. That same year when performing at the ICA Athey's cutting of Fudge's back had to be replaced in the performance of Four Scenes by a recording of it (Johnson, 2012b:135)

heteronormative culture as a receptacle for disease (Johnson, 2011: 506–507). Penetration is paramount to Athey because it is the vagina that is culturally rendered passive within a heterosexual conception of the body (Gallegro, 2014: 79). By this reasoning to be the penetrator is to be active and therefore, if breached, the male body becomes associated with a pejorative femininity characterised by powerlessness, vulnerability and submission. However, auto-penetration offers an additional destabilising quality, for in this act Athey manages to challenge the feminisation of the penetrated male body by rejecting passive/active heterosexual dynamics (Gallegro, 2014: 80).

Consequently, Athey's performances can be seen as a challenge to dominant ideology that limits: the agency that one has over their body; the narrowing down of pleasure to the middle ground of normalcy; the marginalisation of particular bodies in order to privilege others (Johnson, 2012: 131–132). Yet, in a chapter that works against much of the scholarly writing about Athey, Fintan Walsh (2010) argues that many have assumed his work to be radically queer without really considering what precisely constitutes as queer. His practices have been read as parodying masculinity and femininity, and that his use of masochism is a poignant critique of patriarchal power and its notions of fixed subjectivity (Walsh, 2011:111). Walsh continues by noting though that in many of Athey's performances, but specifically *Torture Trilogy* (1993–1995), he has consistently produced images that reinforce normative masculinity's access to the symbolic. The primary argument that is presented here is that Athey's works retain many of the phallic attributes of the centred indestructible male artist (Walsh, 2011: 142). Hence, we might read Athey as performing a type of hypermasculinity.

Walsh's (2010) primary argument is that *Torture Trilogy* heavily emphasises autobiographical accounts of Athey's life, which reconstructs his world in the performance space. This ensures that he is presented as a divine authority by directing attention to himself and his plights. Walsh continues to argue that the additional performers in these works self-mutilate under his cause, rarely speak, and do not control the action (Walsh, 2011: 143). Walsh can be seen to position Athey then in Lacan's phallic order (2001a) as the masculine authority, which controls the feminine object with a view to gain access to the symbolic law (Lacan, 2001: 321). Hence, whilst Athey may be attempting to challenge normativity, his performances proclaim a similar, but still different, position through him being an essential and prominent protagonist (Richards, 2002). Rather than challenging the symbolic law that privileges masculinity the argument presented by Walsh is that Athey serves it by enacting its disciplinary yet immoral procedures (Walsh, 2011: 143).

#### **1.4.2: Abject Autobiography as a Centralising Strategy**

I am not entirely convinced of Walsh's argument here, for his reading of *Torture Trilogy*, and Athey's role within it, does not take into account the way in which Athey and the rest of the company worked together. Neither does it consider how the performance might unify individuals. Recounting the making-process and touring of *Torture Trilogy* cast member Julie Tolentino describes a 'savage care' that went beyond the physical body. Instead, it centred on, listening, excavating, resisting, redefining 'while linking back into our own extant chronicles' (Tolentino, 2013: 115). What seems to be important here then is that not only was there a process of discussion where as a group, decisions were

made and resisted, but multiple personal histories were considered and not just Athey's.

The process aside, and from spectatorial position, Dominic Johnson argues that *Torture Trilogy* 'must be understood primarily in the contexts of the ravages wrought by AIDS in the years between 1981 and 1995 (Johnson, 2013: 26). Thus Athey's use of autobiography, rather than being just a set of narratives about him, may also be seen as a vehicle for wider political concerns (Tolentino, 2013: 110). Performance scholar David Román echoes this in his discussion on how gay artists generously used their creative energy to intervene with the AIDS epidemic, by pulling a community of activists together (Román, 1997: xxvi). In this context, it seems that to only see *Torture Trilogy* as being about Athey ignores the point of the performance, which is to bind people together in a 'camaraderie in the face of death' (Johnson, 2013: 31), something that I refer to in Chapter Four as generosity.

Having said this, I do propose that Athey's autobiographical narratives can be considered as centralising him as a masculine subject in his performances, but my position here is more about his use of the abject than the narratives themselves. Before I expand on this, it is also worth noting that I do not think that his narratives close down the potential multiplicity of meaning in his work. It is correct to say that much of Athey's work derives from his autobiography, but at the same time, many images in his work are so esoteric that without some understanding of his past they remain elusive. In *Self Obliteration I* (2007), for example, he surrounds himself with panes of glass and wears a long blonde wig that is attached to his scalp with needles. As he brushes this wig, the needles pull at his scalp, which encourages his blood to

emerge and flow down his face. Of course, this could be indicative of many aspects of Athey's life, but in *Pleading the Blood* he recounts the moment of his mother Joyce running through a plate glass window in their home, which resulted in having blood matted in her hair (Athey, 2013: 47–48). Hence, although Athey's work is autobiographical, his references can be so opaque that rather than prescribe a centralised character, as with Gilbert and George, they open up the meaning making process of performance further so that audiences are left to fill in the gaps.

Much of Athey's autobiographical images though are iconic references to his past experiences of the abject. In *Four Scenes of a Harsh Life* (1994) Athey pierced his arm with hypodermic needles and inserted smaller needles into his scalp whilst addressing his history as a heroin addict, a gay man, and a person who is HIV-positive (O'Dell, 1998: 81). There are also images that associate him with desiring the abject either through sex practices such as fisting, auto-penetration or through philosophers such as Georges Bataille. The purpose of these particular practices is to unmoor the sexual body from its alignment with categories such as male and heterosexuality (Jones, 2006: 160). Dominic Johnson argues that this 'self-centredness – in the formal sense of unapologetically placing oneself at the centre of artistic production – also 'bleeds' out into concrete possibilities for affective relations: sympathy, identifications, generosity, denial [...] (Johnson, 2012a: 97).

I agree with what Johnson proffers here, for Athey's ability to pull upon his abject experiences and desires raises a variety of different responses and impulses from the spectator. When watching Athey's work one might feel empathy, anger, love, revulsion or a mixture of some, or all of these, or

something that I have not mentioned (Jones, 2013: 152). As Chapter Two explores, the abject can turn a spectator's focus inward offering reflections about their engagement with bodies that are abject. What I suggest Athey is attempting to do is attend to the brand of shame that stigmatises those deemed abject, for in those dark places a fuller range of experiences are available (Athey & Johnson, 2015: 208). He is attempting to make explicit, without any holding back, what exists outside of the safe centre of heteronormativity and what this can offer the subject. He endures the abject then in order to generously offer it to his spectators.

Throughout much of Athey's work it is possible to see images of his hypermasculine body enduring the abject, but it is by aligning his powerful, controlling and enduring body with homoerotic imagery, such as the penetration of his skin with scalpels, or his anus with dildos, that allows for the phallic veil to be exposed. This exposure is achieved because he sits at the margins, for example, he is not seen as penetrating or penetrated, but as both, and I argue that this helps to collapse gender boundaries and creates an anxiety around the erotic male body that is similar to, but not the same as, Gilbert and George's. However, there is a distinct difference in the representations of muscular masculinity between Athey and the other artists discussed in this chapter. This difference occurs because while Stuart Brisley and Gilbert and George perform a corporeal anxiety, Athey induces it through his explicit references to the pleasures of the penetrating/penetrable male body.

Moreover, these pleasures and desires are his, and as Kristeva articulates, the abject, whilst being similar to the objet petit a in that they are both ambiguous, is different because it collapses meaning (Kristeva, 1982: 9).



Conversely, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is the objet petit a that drives the infant towards the symbolic, whereas the abject is the adult fear of returning over that threshold into the realm of the real (Grosz, 1994: 81). In this respect, Athey's endurance of the abject has the potential to collapse meaning for the spectator by making explicit the multiplicity of experiences that it might offer. In doing so, his actions raise questions about what we consider to be right and wrong about different bodies, what they do, and why this might be. At the same time as a spectator, I see him becoming a self rather than being fragmented. That is because these abject practices, as a result of being so explicitly autobiographical, are Ron Athey.

## **Conclusion**

Artists that are read in this chapter as being indicative of muscular masculinity can be seen to portray hypermasculine characteristics as a way of controlling the abject male body. In doing so, they can also be seen to challenge masculine ideology by performing a male corporeal anxiety, which, as Calvin Thomas argues, is attributed to the fear of being perceived as weak, vulnerable and powerless (1996: 12). I also propose that some of the anxiety that is revealed by these artists, particularly in Ron Athey's work, is based upon a cultural fear of finding male corporeality and the abject pleasurable. Despite the destabilising potential of muscular masculinity, I argue that in different ways these artists' can also be read as adhering to the patriarchal requirements for a coherent masculine identity. For me, this is explicit in the way that Stuart Brisley and Gilbert and George opt to perform someone else's corporeal anxiety rather

than their own, a strategy that hides the incoherence of their own identity. Although Athey's approach is different from Gilbert and George and Stuart Brisley, his ability to endure the abject and align it with his autobiographical narratives, also seem to centralise his self. The problem with this is that it lends itself towards the reinscription of masculinity in the performance space as coherent. The result of these moments is a performance that destabilises normative male identity whilst at the same time reinforces it.

As I move into the second chapter and the first performance of this doctoral project *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012), I have some questions that need to be answered in relation to the paradox presented above. That is, how can I challenge normative representations of masculinity without reinscribing the same ideology that I am trying to destabilise? Why might personal experiences of masculinity be used to destabilise both my understanding of gender and cultural understandings of masculinity? How can I expose the vulnerability of my masculine identity without centralising it and presenting myself as a coherent subject?

## Chapter 2: Performing Abject Masculinities

This chapter aims to demonstrate, through a critical discussion of the first PaR performance of this doctoral project, *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012), how a destabilisation of normative masculinity can occur in male body-based<sup>11</sup> performance without re-inscribing phallic masculinity. My approach to *Spitting Distance* developed from a close critical reading of Vito Acconci's performance to camera *Conversions III* (1971), although, where *Spitting Distance* differed from Acconci's performance is in my use of abject autobiographical narratives. Self-reflexivity is employed in this chapter as a way of looking back over *Spitting Distance*. The point of employing this strategy was to compare my experiences of having a masculine identity with the expectations and requirements of patriarchy. I propose that by using the abject personal narrative in my practice I was afforded the opportunity to reveal my fragmented and incoherent self, which in turn performatively produced an intersubjective gap.

### 2.1: Contextualising Spitting Distance

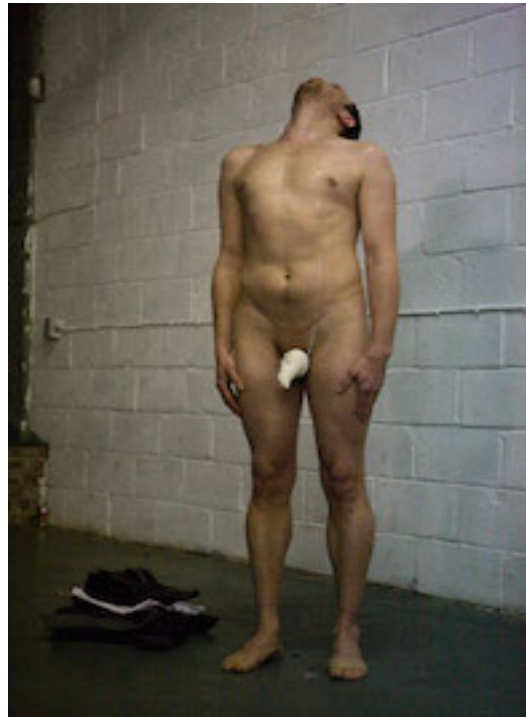
The purpose of *Spitting Distance* was to explore embodied experiences of masculinity and use these as an alternative making strategy to avoid reinscribing phallic masculinity into the performance space. The aims for this performance were:

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<sup>11</sup> In the introduction to this thesis I outlined what I meant by body-based performance, but for the purpose of this chapter I will just quickly note that this term implies a self-reflection on the experiences of being an artist in those works and the affect this had on the world around me.

- To develop an approach to body-based performance art that avoids the reinforcement of normative representations of masculinity
- To critically respond through practice to key moments of *Conversions III* (1971) in order to explore how Acconci's performance demonstrates alternative approaches to phallic masculinity
- To experiment with personal experiences of masculinity in the construction of a performance work
- To explore why these experiences are useful in destabilising normative representations of masculinity.

As part of this doctoral project *Spitting Distance* was performed twice, once at the University of Plymouth in November 2011, and a second time, with some slight adaptations<sup>12</sup>, at the performance festival *Tempting Failure* in February 2012. In this chapter, my discussion will focus specifically on my experiences in the second performance, although when I do discuss the first, I



will make explicit reference to this. As a [Figure 2.1: Spitting into the Air and onto My Body in Spitting Distance at Tempting Failure](#) piece of body-based performance, *Spitting Distance* was typical in its delivery

<sup>12</sup> The second performance consisted of me entering into the space naked at the beginning, and changing into a three-piece suit at the end. These changes were made for aesthetic reasons and not conceptual ones.

as it was informally staged with the spectators defining the boundary between performance and audience spaces. At *Tempting Failure* the work can be seen to operate in three phases, the first consisted of me entering the performance space naked, pulling at my penis, and then spitting into the air onto my body as seen in Figure 2.1. In the second phase, I traversed the informal boundary into the audience space and encouraged individuals to spit into my hands, which was then wiped down my body as seen in Figure 2.2. The third was to invite spectators into the performance space to spit directly onto my body.

It is worth quickly pointing up now the disparity between my experiences of performing in Plymouth compared to those at *Tempting Failure*, as this will inform my



Figure 2.2: Traversing the Boundary into the Audience Space in *Spitting Distance* at *Tempting Failure*

observations later in the chapter. At the University of Plymouth, the audience was comprised of a mixture of undergraduate students and members of the academic staff who entered the space while I was standing naked. The second half of phase one was performed as it was at *Tempting Failure*, however in phase two, rather than transgressing the boundary each audience member and I moved towards each other. Unlike at *Tempting Failure*, the majority of the audience at Plymouth spat into my hand, and in the final phase spat onto my body, which ended when individuals declined to enter the space. In Plymouth I concluded *Spitting Distance* by saying "thank you" to the audience. Conversely,

in the final phase at *Tempting Failure*, I ended the performance earlier than expected by changing into my suit as I started to experience feelings of shame and anxiety with regards to the way that some spectators engaged with my body. It is these experiences of shame and anxiety that form the primary focus of this chapter.

## **2.2: A Critical Response to Vito Acconci's *Conversions III***

The period between 1970 and 1975 is an era where Vito Acconci explored representations of gendered identities specifically through the medium of performance to camera. Many of these pieces involved an exploration of the limitations and boundaries of language systems by himself and his live-in partner at the time, Kathy Dillon. These included exploring the physical and mental limitations of the body, the boundaries between sexes, and the limitations of intersubjective interaction (Linker and Acconci, 1994: 20). While many of his works could be said to explore concepts of masculine representation, the three performances in *Conversions* series explicitly do this. In these performances, he uses his body to explore the symbolic boundaries of gender and the potential for transgression, which demonstrates his allegiance to feminist scholarly writing of the time. However, as Calvin Thomas notes, just because a project attempts to resist patriarchy does not mean that it is a feminist one (Thomas, 1996: 17). In consideration of this point, I do not see *Conversions* as a feminist project just because it deals with the representation of differently gendered identities.

In performance one of *Conversions*, Acconci stands close to the camera and executes a number of actions. In a darkened room, he holds a candle to his body. Sometimes it is possible to glimpse what part of his body he is

highlighting, but most of the time all we see is a piece of abstracted flesh. As the first performance progresses, he abstracts his body with the candlelight, but as the heat touches his body hair, it curls up and disappears. In one moment, patches of his body reveal a transition from hairy masculine to smooth skinned and almost feminine. The slipping between these gender signifiers marks an important observation on the part of Acconci, as the performance recognises the social expectations of masculine and feminine representation and the recognition that nature has nothing to do with gender. All human beings have body hair, although women are encouraged to remove their hair in order to be recognised as more feminine<sup>13</sup>.

The visual signification of sexed subjects continues into *Conversions II* where Acconci tucks his penis between his legs to suggest a vagina and undertakes a series of movements (walking, running, bending) back and forth towards the camera. Acconci's attempt at female signification highlights the level of lack that is culturally associated with the female body (Blocker, 2004: 11). While there are a number of ways he could have signified this move, the visual reference to the missing penis evocatively nods towards the ambiguity associated with Lacan's (2001) concept of the phallus and its conflation with the penis; a process that was described in Chapter One as affording some men power over women.

It is performance three though that forms the primary focus of this chapter. For the first time in this series Kathy Dillon is placed within the space,

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<sup>13</sup> While at the time to have less body hair might have signified being more feminine it is worth noting that in the 21st Century this is not necessarily the case. As Gough, Hull, & Seymour-Smith (2014) observe, men in Britain are now also engaging in strategies that enhance their bodies, for example, weight loss programmes and the application of makeup. As such this suggests that ideology around appropriate gender characteristics does change significantly over relatively short periods of time and geography.

although not as a collaborative artist; rather she is a tool for Acconci's creativity. Kneeling down naked behind Acconci as he tucks his penis between his legs, she places it into her mouth, at which point he executes similar movements to those in *Conversions II* (1970). As a way of giving context to this action, Acconci's programme note states: 'When I'm seen from the front, the woman disappears behind me and I have no penis, I become the woman I have cancelled out' (Acconci cited in Jones, 1998: 144). The problem that I have with this performance is just that, Dillon is 'a woman', she is not named or credited in the work, and she appears to become a conduit for the realisation of Acconci's artistic needs.

Whilst scholarly writing on *Conversions III* (1971) outlines the misogyny of Acconci's actions, it is split as to whether or not the work also challenges representations of masculinity. Mira Schor notes that 'the phallus re-inscribes itself over the erased/lacking woman, even as the penis is hidden as usual' (Schor, 1988: 8). Her point here is that Acconci demonstrates phallic power over Dillon as a way of defining and reinforcing normative representations of masculinity. Because the penis cannot live up to the ideal of the phallus, because it is flaccid, and lacking strength, rigidity and coherence, it must be hidden and veiled somehow. The only way Acconci could think to do this was penetrating Dillon's mouth, a move that reaffirms the cultural image of the 'penetrable woman'. This action could be understood as a reinforcement of Lacan's matrix where in order to achieve unification the masculine subject demands the feminine to become the phallic object, essentially erasing her identity (Lacan, 2001: 321). Therefore, I argue that rather than challenge notions of masculinity through the feminine Acconci reveals in *Conversions III*



what Simone de Beauvoir observed in her text *The Second Sex*<sup>14</sup>; that femininity is a masculine construction (de Beauvoir, 2014: 468).

Amelia Jones offers a slightly different perspective by arguing that to assert that *Conversions* is misogynistic is reductive, instead, there is something more complicated happening in this practice. Her position on the work is that whether Acconci was aware of it or not, he was completing a post-structuralist turn. By presenting gender as two sides of a binary, she ascertains that the performance of gender can be renegotiated and re-evaluated (Jones, 1998: 144). In the first instance, Acconci's own body reveals the lack of control and power masculinity usually affords him (Jones, 1994: 566). In *Conversions II*, his penis slips out from between his legs, and in *III* from Dillon's mouth. Both act as potential metaphors for the slippage of masculine signs on the male body. Secondly, she notes that the need to continuously perform masculinity testifies not to its coherence but its interdependence with femininity (Jones, 1998: 145). What Acconci demonstrates, at least from Jones' perspective, is that the repetitive and hyperbolic practices of masculinity and femininity can result in a reading that confuses the configuration of masculinity in relation to power and the body.

This post-structuralist argument where masculinity is performed to such an extent that it deconstructs itself is difficult to accept when, as Jane Blocker notes in *What the Body Costs*, one simply cannot get past what those bodies are actually doing in that space (Blocker, 2010: 10). Acconci's control and Dillon's conformity might emphasise gender as a construction, but *Conversions III* also exposes the way a gendered or sexual identity is produced. That is, the

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<sup>14</sup> Originally published in 1949

individual embodies cultural prohibition as a result of forcible effects and regulatory power (Butler, 2011: 63–64). Hence, while Acconci makes explicit the construction of gender he also reinforces it through his demonstration of dominance and control, two strategies that enable men to achieve their status in patriarchy.

There is another paradox in *Conversions III* (1971) that is worth considering, for, on the one hand, Acconci's performances to camera during this period seems to present a masculinity that is removed from the embodiment of an identity and instead reflects a series of normative symbolic texts. In this respect, I propose that one might read his performance of masculinity as a general ahistorical linguistic split between the signifiers of the body and the cultural concepts that they appear to produce (Thomas, 1996: 42); something that will be explored further in Chapter Three. This is also reflected in a filmed interview in which Acconci participated with Willoughby Sharp. Here Acconci notes, with a little prompting from Sharp, that during the 1970s he was interested in testing the different ways in which he, as a masculine subject, could exert power (Sharp, 1973).

However, in addition to demonstrating the performance of generic gendered identities, *Conversions III* might also be seen as an intimate personal portrait of the artist and his relationships with other individuals at a very specific time in his life. This autobiographical trace is something that emerged some years later in a 1985 issue of *Arts Magazine* where Acconci states, responding in part to another performance *Remote Control* (1971), that:

[those works] are really sexist. It's pretty clear that they are about dominance and submission in a relationship and I was the dominant one ... I hate maleness and I hate male domination, but because it is so culturally embedded, I can readily fall into it [...] (Acconci cited in Jones, 1998: 135).

## **2.3: Designing Performance Strategies from *Conversions III***

Despite the turbulent identity politics of *Conversions*, I see Acconci as almost demonstrating some strategies that could challenge the representations of masculinity in male body-based performance without reinforcing its ideology. The potential strategies that I have identified as being useful in *Conversions III* are the focus on masculine identity, and the transgression of borders. However, I have developed upon these two approaches in the following ways: Instead of looking back on my work and noting how my actions were indicative of my identity at that time, my focus in *Spitting Distance* was on exploring my personal experiences of masculinity. Furthermore, instead of transgressing the gender boundaries by performing femininity to critique masculinity, my approach was to look instead at how my lived experiences of my body could transgress normative masculine ideologies.

### **2.3.1: Autobiographical Narratives**

In Chapter One I identified through an exploration of hypermasculinity, that patriarchal discourse requires men to perform a fixed stable and unified image of masculinity. In some respects, Acconci's performance in *Conversions III* confirms a similar representation through his demonstrations of control and power over Dillon. Although, Amelia Jones argues that Acconci actually demonstrated a more 'sensitive' approach than this reading allows for by exposing the vulnerability associated with his masculinity (Jones, 1998: 132). I think that there is a degree of caution needed here for Acconci's sensitivity only comes on the backdrop of his reflections fifteen years later and not in the

moment of performance. His ability to make explicit his masochistic pathos, as defined by Jones (1998), was undermined because his misogyny meant that his 'sensitivity' was at the expense of Kathy Dillon. I do argue though that as a result of reflecting back on *Conversions III*, albeit some years later, and demonstrating his distaste towards his identity, there is the possibility that change could have occurred. Assuming that it had, then this would illustrate sociologist Michael Kimmel's point that masculinity is as much a preference as it is an enforced set of ideals (Kimmel, 2000: 11). That is, one does not have to adhere to the masculine ideologies that normativity sets out for us, instead, there is always the possibility that men can change their ideals, although as I propose in Chapter Four, this is not always easy.

The observation of Acconci's shifting conception of masculine identity formed the primary strategy for the making process in *Spitting Distance*, because rather than performing symbolic codes my approach was to reflect upon my lived experiences of masculinity. A masculine identity is derived at the intersection of four elements, which include societal, sub-cultural, bodily, and personal influences (Harris, 1995: 10). The latter refers to the environment that the male subject was raised in, the relationship that they have with their parents, their experiences of other people<sup>15</sup>, and their display of masculine traits (Harris, 1995: 11). The first problem that I came up against, however, was identifying different experiences that demonstrated the potential for extracting useful material for performance. To overcome this issue, I drew upon sociologist Ian Harris' (1995) book *Messages Men Hear* where six levels of masculine

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<sup>15</sup> In the introduction of this thesis I briefly noted that masculine identity as a series of performed symbolic codes, whilst usually applied to men, can also be performed by other sexes. However, as Judith Halberstam (1998) notes these masculinities are commonly considered rejected scraps of normative masculinity.

development in the male subject are classified<sup>16</sup>. My focus was on the first where male children, up until the age of twelve, learn different forms of masculinity from various people.

Initially, the generation of an autobiographical performance seemed to be the most useful political strategy partly because I planned to use it in a similar manner to feminist artists such as Bobby Baker, Sophie Calle and Jess Dobkin. These artists, among others, use or have used their own narratives to demonstrate and problematise perceptions of femininity by expressing their ability to not conform to it (Bennett, 2013: 47). As well as the demonstration of non-conformity, autobiographical performance can make explicit the way self is constructed as a fixed, stable entity. In *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988), for example, Bobby Baker only ever performs a persona of 'Bobby Baker' and in donning the white uniform, she performs a hysterically exaggerated version of herself (Heddon, 2008: 42). Despite never revealing any personal information, there is an assumption that the person in front of us is the 'real' Bobby Baker. Therefore, as a strategy autobiography can problematise the concrete and authoritative "I" and its relationship to "truth"; it is able to do this because it promotes a "self" that shifts towards a performed and reconstructed self (Heddon, 2008: 39–41).

My concern with presenting *Spitting Distance* as a performance in which I would speak the memory of my autobiography was that this is also a political

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<sup>16</sup> The six levels that Harris (1995) proposes are: Level 1 Learning how to identify by sex, Level 2 The formation of male gender identity, Level 3 Trying out identity, Level 4 Affirming identity, Level 5 Evaluating Identity, and Level Six Accepting Identity. These levels obviously increase as the male subject gets older, but are also fluid. What I find interesting though is the way that Harris identifies the change that happens between adulthood (Level 4 between the ages of 30–40), Maturity (Level 5 between the ages of 40–50), and Seniority (Level 6 from the age 50+). In this model, he notes that while at adulthood men are forming their concepts of self, at maturity they start to test those concepts. It is only in Seniority where Harris proposes that men perform an authentic masculine-self (Harris, 1995: 49).

strategy that gives a voice to marginalised individuals and communities (Heddon, 2008: 4). To make the personal political is a useful destabilising strategy for male subjects because it means that they cannot master or control from a distance, that they must analyse their desires and not retain the impersonal safety of authenticity (Heath, 2002: 5). Whilst celebrating the autobiographical in performance though Heddon offers a warning, for she notes that 'some performances might well "fail" to communicate, "fail" to move us, teach us, inspire us, challenge us' (Heddon, 2008: 2). She continues by noting that some performances might also constrain and repress. With this in mind, I was concerned that an autobiographical narrative would make my voice even louder than it already is as a white, middle-class, heterosexual male. I worried that such an approach would also re-inscribe Lacan's masculine subject, who because of the penis/phallus conflation<sup>17</sup>, is a subject whose access to the symbolic allows him to become the authoritative "I". Instead my approach was to employ Peggy Phelan's strategy in *Mourning Sex* (1997), where rather than describing a narrative in 'direct signification,' my approach would be to attempt to 'make explicit the force of that event' (Phelan, 1997: 12).

For Phelan, the 'affective force' means to capture the moment at the point where the event affects or is interpreted by the subject; the focus is not on the description, but rather on capturing the essence of a moment. In *Mourning Sex*, for example, Phelan uses the way that bodies are staged in buildings and the way that buildings are constructed around those bodies to reveal the interrelationship between law and corporeal identity (Phelan, 1997: 81). The purpose of this practice is to encourage the event in question to point back to

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<sup>17</sup> Phallic/Penis conflation is discussed in Chapter One

itself and the scenes that motivate it, rather than describe the narrative in direct address. I used 'affective force' in *Spitting Distance* to make evident an 'excess of meaning' through interpretation, by placing emphasis on the corporeal experience of my narratives rather than recounting them directly to the audience, which is a position that I reconsider in Chapter Four.

While Phelan generates the affective force through the medium of writing on the page, my approach was to locate the pivotal action of my autobiographical narrative directly in the performance space. I hoped that this would do two things; the first is that the affective force would create a multiplicity of meaning because the participants could not locate that story with me, rather the actions that I perform would act as a reminder of their own experiences of spitting. Secondly, I hoped that by removing spoken narrative, the action that was at the heart of that autobiographical moment would reveal not only the social constructions of my gendered identity but also the corporeal experiences that might have been covered by the narratives that I had woven around them.

### **2.3.2: Transgression**

When Acconci created *Conversions* his aim was to perform femininity in order to critique masculinity, the fundamental problem with this approach was that he attempted to evoke femininity through the visual signification of female physiological characteristics. There are two further interrelated issues with this act; the first is that *Conversions* cannot be seen to destabilise gender norms until it overcomes Dillon's exclusion. This includes her literal artistic exclusion from the credits, but also, as Blocker argues: '[because] Acconci plays both roles - male and female – he seems [...] to reassert rather than question philosophy's tradition of establishing binaries, in which the feminine is created

as a category even as women are denied presence in it (Blocker, 2004: 12). Related to this issue is Acconci's focus on the performance of the feminine, which only destabilises gender from within the binary of male/female, masculine/feminine, and in turn re-establishes the very same binary that it aims to challenge (Çakırlar, 2011: 91).

*Spitting Distance* was not about performing the symbolic qualities of gender, even from the perspective of my autobiographical narrative, but rather it focussed on identifying moments in which my body and identity transgressed normative assumptions about masculinity. My decision to approach *Spitting Distance* in this way was based on Calvin Thomas' observation that the relationship between men and their bodies is rarely spoken about outside of activities that demonstrate it as being strong, powerful and skilled, such as sport, and therefore the male body is marked with profound anxiety (Thomas, 1996: 11) (as discussed in Chapter One). It is for this reason that the physical matter that men's bodies produce or cause to appear, or which are concealed such as urine, shit and tears, are culturally displaced onto the feminine (Thomas, 2008: 4). Therefore, to include the transgressive elements in my autobiography is to make evident that to have a body is to have holes and, as noted in the previous chapter, to have holes is to be culturally seen as penetrable, leaky, vulnerable, powerless and weak (Thomas, 1996: 12). The point of *Spitting Distance* was not about attempting to perform masculine or feminine identities as Acconci did in *Conversions*. Rather it is about embracing my abject body, it's about opening up and making explicit the lived experiences of men as a way to challenge gender norms altogether.



The concept of the abject, which was explored in Chapter One, derives from Kristeva's observation that in Lacan's the mirror stage the first thing to be abjected is the maternal body (Kristeva, 1982: 6). However, this in itself creates an unhelpful binary, because as Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (2007), Kristeva's (1982) concept promotes an essentialism of the maternal body that assumes a set of meanings prior to culture itself. In doing so, according to Butler, Kristeva ends up safeguarding culture as a paternal structure and limits the maternal body to a precultural reality (Butler, 2007: 109). Despite Kristeva's critique of Lacan, Butler proposes that Kristeva's strategy of subversion is doubtful because it relies on the stability of the patriarchal system, which is only later destabilised through the penetration of its boundaries (Butler, 2007: 108).

As a metaphor though I recognise Kristeva's position as a useful one, because the rejected maternal body echoes the cultural relationship that hegemonic masculinity requires men to have with their own bodies. That is, anything that can be seen to emphasise the ambiguity of the male body, and bring into conflict the image of the phallic masculine, must be rejected. Thus, if we consider Kristeva's concept of the abject as a metaphor it gives new light to the following quote: 'The one by whom the abject exists is ... a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing' (Kristeva, 1982: 8, original emphasis). Because the feminine as abject can be considered a patriarchal metaphor (Blocker, 2004: 72), when Kristeva (1982) brackets 'himself' she is not implying that only the male subject can be abject, in the same way that she is not saying that the female body is always already abject. Rather Kristeva is suggesting that the male subject who separates himself from patriarchal assumptions about

sex and gender 'becomes abject' by operating within the margins of masculine and feminine. The abject is not about the male subject becoming feminised, even if this is what patriarchy might define him as, it is about using the power of transgressing patriarchal systems to create a critical relation to official discourse (Walsh, 2011: 180). By men accepting their corporeality and transgressing patriarchal ideology they may reject the idea of just being defined by culturally prescribed codes, and instead embrace the multiplicity associated with who we are.

### **2.3.3: Spitting Distance**

The point of *Spitting Distance* was to challenge the fixed and stable image of phallic masculinity through the affective force of an abject autobiographical narrative. The memory that was eventually chosen for *Spitting Distance* was one from when I was about ten years old that involved spittle. I was playing outside the family home and at some point, I slipped and landed on a piece of gravel. The stone broke the skin on my knee and made a deep crater shape in my flesh, and on noticing this, I burst into tears and ran into the house wanting to find my mother. Instead of finding her, I found my father who promptly sat me on the kitchen worktop, pulled out the stone, spat on his hand, and wiped the dust and blood away from my knee.

I chose this particular memory because for me spittle, even as a bodily fluid, is ambiguous. It can, of course, be seen as disgusting, aggressive, and repulsive, despite this, parents still use it to wipe their offspring's dirty cheeks or damaged knees. What I really like about spittle, is that its ambiguity can also be metonymically associated with the mouth. I find this interesting, because it is from here that we make meaning out of flesh and as such, it is from this orifice

where many of us are able to make connections with the realm of the symbolic (Blocker, 2004: 19). However, Georges Bataille notes, that the mouth also links us back to the beast, for it is this orifice that reveals our bestial instincts; when we're angry we grind our teeth, when we're scared they chatter, and when we are experiencing the deepest of pain the mouth howls (Bataille, 1985: 59). The abject, says Kristeva, 'confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal' (Kristeva, 1982: 12). Spittle was used then because it acts as a reminder that language and waste exit from the same hole and that hole is also abject. By sharing that hole, language might be seen to be sullied by spittle.

## **2.4: Experiencing the Abject Self**

When I reflect upon performing *Spitting Distance at Tempting Failure*, I am continually drawn back to three particular moments where my experience resulted in me stopping the performance early. The first involved a woman coming into the space and dribbling along the length of my penis. The second was a man who snorted, and then spat sputum onto my chest, and the third was when a man ran through the audience and spat whisky in my face, which was then followed by the audience laughing. There were other examples where individuals engaged with the work in very different ways, but I am continuously drawn to these three moments because at the time they made me feel vulnerable, dirty, and ashamed. These feelings were wrapped up with these particular experiences because I could not understand why those people had attempted to challenge me in that particular way. However, I came to recognise that it was not necessarily the actions of those people that concerned

me, instead what I found so disconcerting about these moments was that I was not in control of my identity.

#### **2.4.1: Shame and Anxiety**

To feel shame and guilt, according to sociologist Anthony Giddens, is to experience two separate but interrelated concepts about the construction of self. Guilt is anxiety produced through a fear of transgression, where the thoughts and activities of the subject do not match normative expectations (Giddens, 1991: 64). Shame, conversely, bears directly on self-identity because it is an anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative, by which the individual sustains a coherent biography (Giddens, 1991: 45). If shame and anxiety are based on the transgressions of one's own understanding of identity, and the transgressions of normative expectations, then this would suggest that both of these were as a result of experiencing abjection. Julia Kristeva does make the connection between shame and anxiety and the corporeal responses of the body when experiencing abjection. She notes that the abject 'worries' the subject, they are 'sickened' by it, they find it 'repulsive' and 'shameful' (Kristeva, 1982: 1). It also makes them 'suffer' or 'endure' 'spasms and vomiting', 'retching' and 'gagging' because these are safeguards to our identity (Kristeva, 1982: 2).

Following on from Kristeva's (1982) assertion, it seemed that my experiences of abjection in *Spitting Distance* came down to the differences between how I perceived myself compared to how others perceived me. There were two occasions when other people made these differences apparent to me. My first experience of this was at a postgraduate conference at the University of Surrey. At this conference, after delivering a paper on *Spitting Distance*, a

woman as part of the question and answer session said that no man should ever have to experience the act of other people spitting on him. A year later, when the performance documentation<sup>18</sup> for *Spitting Distance* was put online, a work colleague informed me that it was inappropriate for the students to see me in that way. He felt it was important for me to consider whether or not I ask for some of those images to be taken down.

#### **2.4.2: Performatively Producing Intersubjectivity**

It became clear at this point that the abjection that I experienced was not necessarily about the shame and anxiety associated with the distance between my understanding of self and how others wanted me to be. Instead, it was a distancing of, for want of a better word, my social-self from myself. The image of my social-self can be articulated through Judith Butler's argument that linguistic constructs shape our reality by creating social fictions (Butler, 2007: 151–152). My social-self then is the self that performs the appropriate characteristics, behaviours and traits that allow me to be socially defined in particular ways. I mean this in relation to, of course, masculinity and my ability to pass for this, of which part of that will also be about performing being male, which, in and of itself is also its own social fiction (Fausto-Sterling, 2000: 50–51)<sup>19</sup>. Yet social-self is also about adhering to the politeness of society in more ways than sex and gender, as it is also the roles and responsibilities that are given to us; the social-self as a teacher, for example. Simon Jones might articulate the social-self as citizen, which he says refers to the shell that hides

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<sup>18</sup> All photographic documentation for this project can be found in Appendix A at the back of this thesis

<sup>19</sup> Anne Fausto-Sterling in her book *Sexing the Body* (2000) discusses how sex is a social construction in the way that doctors, and sometimes parents, decide on the appropriate sex of an inter-sexed baby. The dual sex system of the West then is as much a social construction as the dual-gendered one mentioned in Chapter One.

the person from embarrassment and allows them to ease into society (Jones, 2012: 33).

Importantly, I think, in relation to my experiences of *Spitting Distance*, Jones argues that while the citizen is protected by her civil armour, she still worries that she is not doing things right (Jones, 2012a: 33-34). For this reason, the image of myself that I thought I had deviated from as a result of performing *Spitting Distance* was me, as a social-self, or a citizen, and in turn what I transgressed to is my person, who is not adequately expressed by way of the social (Jones, 2012a: 34). The way that this distancing emerged was through the intimate encounters that I experienced with those three people. Dominic Johnson does not articulate intimacy as being the banal middle of the road intimacy that is associated with normative romance (Johnson, 2012b: 122). Instead, he sees intimacy as a volatile, complicated and meaningful category of experiences that 'directs the subject away from utopian identifications and pastoral impulses [...]' (Johnson, 2012a: 91). Intimacies then can come in the form of joy, fulfilment, abjection, despair, promiscuity, and tenderness to name but a few. We might argue then that intimacy is the opening up of experiences, sensations, emotions, and deep visceral feelings.

This distancing between the strict symbolic codes of gender, class, race, and, even career of being citizen, from the more fluid body of the person that emerges from it, is an experience that may be quite specific to performance. This is because the person is made to appear directly in front of people, but also before them in time, so they can be seen to have a life and a history previous to that moment (Jones, 2012b: 34). Some of these histories and some of these lives that are beyond the confines of the citizen start to emerge through

'inclusive encountering of communal attending, of spending time together, of dialoguing' (Jones, 2012b: 35). The dialoguing that emerged in *Spitting Distance* was not always vocal but was present in the various ways in which our bodies interacted with each other. When allowing myself to be more attentive to the performance, I also begin to see that there were more dialogues present here than just the three mentioned above. One woman, for example, entered the space and after exchanging glances with me decided to spit into my shoe; another spectator, after spitting, smiled at me and said thank you.

When reflecting back on my initial experiences of abjection as a result of the distancing of my social-self from myself, I can see that abjection occurred in the form of anxiety because in allowing others to spit onto my body I had exceeded the strict symbols of my citizenship. To be spat on is not to be manly, to be made vulnerable is not professional, and to be seen as being in excess of our symbolic codes caused me to worry. Yet, this was not the limit of my abjection because I was still concerned with the way that those people had engaged with my body. This concern emerged because of the gap that existed between their intention and my interpretation of that intention. In this respect what *Spitting Distance* offered was time and space to dwell upon the unknowable that is present in these spaces (Jones, 2012b: 160). What became apparent as a result of that dwelling is that if gaps emerged as a result of the differences between intention and inference then there could also be gaps between my understanding of self and how others perceive me. The impact of this observation meant that I had to confront the fragmentation and incoherence of my identity, which caused me to recognise that I cannot possibly completely know who "I" am.

Therefore, my concerns about why those people engaged with my body in those particular ways was not really about that at all, but rather about how myself had become multiple through their actions and how others might fill in those gaps. In this respect, my abjection also occurred because I had become ashamed that the coherence of my identity had become disrupted by the other. This is not a new concept, Maurice Merleau-Ponty noted that the other is the first cultural object in the world that we engage with; it is the other that allows us to understand ourselves in the world that we operate in (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 405). What seems significant about *Spitting Distance* is that it performatively produced an intersubjective space between self and other. Amelia Jones recognises the intersubjective gap in 1960s and 1970s body art when she notes that the 'enactment of the artistic body [...] enables the circulation of desires among subjects of making and viewing' (Jones, 1998: 51). This intersubjectivity entails the acknowledgement that one is never fully performing one's self and that one always needs the other to form one's subjectivity (Ross, 2006: 172).

I do not want to suggest that before *Spitting Distance* I was not intersubjective, what I want to highlight is the way in which that performance made me uncomfortably aware of my intersubjectivity. In performing *Spitting Distance*, it was like allowing a gap to be prised open between what I know and what I don't know about myself. That is, what you know and others know, but that which does not meet. This 'unknowability' became disconcerting because in addition to not being able to control the signification of my own identity, as a result of it being prised open, "I" had also become soft and penetrable (Cixous, 2003a: 134). In Cixous' terms, it had begun to feel like an undifferentiated boundary between self and other, and a constant reminder that I am



fragmented and permeable (Cixous, 2003a: 136). Through a Kristevan perspective, we might metaphorically see these openings as the creation of new orifices; dark, ambiguous spaces that are the very margins of me, but which also repulse me (Kristeva, 1982: 72). Therefore, it was the intersubjective gaps that appeared during *Spitting Distance* that resulted in me experiencing myself as abject.

## **2.5: Self-Reflexivity Through the Abject Gaze**

When I reflect on my experiences in the first performance of *Spitting Distance* at the University of Plymouth, compared with the second, it is clear that what makes them distinctive is the way in which they highlighted my engagement with the world around me. Whereas at *Tempting Failure* my intersubjective relationships with other people were highlighted, at Plymouth this was not the case. The only learning that took place from that work was the desire to change some aesthetics between performances in relation to the addition of the suit and my entrance. Whilst my learning in the second performance of *Spitting Distance* was significant, in hindsight so was the first's, but only through a realisation that the abject did not always securely transgress normalcy. As such, in order to articulate my relationship to the abject in that first performance, I revisited the documentation.

### **2.5.1: Abject Gaze**

Writing in the context of the horror genre in cinema, film scholar Barbara Creed in her book *Phallic Panic* refers to the concept of looking away as the abject gaze (Creed, 2005: 32). She defines this as being the moment when the spectator is no longer able to stand the images of horror unfolding in front of

them. This act of turning away occurs because the strategies for identification are temporarily broken and the voyeuristic pleasure of watching becomes punishable through pain (Creed, 2007: 28). The act of viewing these abject acts puts the subject's sense of unified self into crisis, specifically when the image being watched threatens to drag the viewer to the point where meaning collapses, to the very 'place of death' that the film is depicting (Creed, 2007: 29). It is at the point, just at the moment when the subject averts their gaze and looks elsewhere, an act of not-looking, that the abject gaze becomes manifest.

The abject-gaze as outlined by Creed (2005; 2007) is not too dissimilar to the spectatorial experiences of abjection in live performance, the difference being that the act of looking away in a live context might be considered more politicised. This politicisation is similar to that of Kathy O'Dell's articulation of the artist-audience relationship in masochistic works, particularly during the 1970s. In *Contract with the Skin*, O'Dell argues that performance works such as Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) sets up an environment in which audience members are complicit with the actions being performed, while at the same time being aware of the huge gap between them and the artist (O'Dell, 1998: 17). Performer-audience relationships within these types of performances raise concerns about the 'everyday agreements – or contracts – that we make with others but that may not be in our best interests' (O'Dell, 1998: 2). Similarly in watching an artist engage in abject acts, and by experiencing abjection within those performances, the abject-gaze constructs an environment that tests the limits of acceptability and prompts ethical responses from the audience (Arya, 2014b: 10).

After the second performance, I came to realise that the ethics that *Spitting Distance* concerned itself with was its ability to challenge preconceived notions of masculine identity. The performance did this in the way that it highlighted the visceral male body and provided the potential for alternative pleasures and experiences outside of what normalcy requires men to experience. In doing so, *Spitting Distance* attends to the question of what it means to be a man and how this relates to our preconceptions of masculinity in the West. On this note, rather than seeing all men as attending to, or needing to attend to, clear and distinct identities, whether that be homosexual, heterosexual, feminine, masculine or whatever, it raises questions about the signifying potential of male corporeality. That is, *Spitting Distance* considers, and this is discussed further in Chapter Four, the extent to which male corporeality can signify an excess of the symbolic. Furthermore, it asks how can our bodies, the bodies of others, and our own autobiographical narratives collapse the boundaries associated with those socially defined categories above for multiplicity of interpretation to ensue, which is discussed further in Chapter Three.

### **2.5.2: Self-Reflexivity**

Whilst scholarly readings of other artists' performances that incorporate the abject raise questions about acceptability, ethics, and the challenges to identity, rarely is the abject-gaze spoken about, or even referenced, from the position of the artist. To be sure personal reflections do happen after the event, Acconci's observation on his video performances demonstrates this, but the abject gaze is performative in that when evoked it affects the world around us. Questions are raised about the ethics of identity and discourse is opened up,

which aims to transform both the individual and the wider social environment. For me to simply reflect upon my experiences of abjection does not offer transformation, all it does is recognise at that moment in time I experienced something. For change to occur there needs to be something more than reflection there also needs to be action.

To be self-reflexive means that one becomes aware of situations where one's social world has been challenged or disturbed, and in turn act on these moments with the purpose of altering the situation in some way (Styhre & Tienari, 2014: 446). Whilst obviously important for all people, this is a particularly significant process for many men because it forces individuals to interpret both the emotions of others and their own in order to describe the way in which we make the world our own (Holmes, 2015: 177). This in itself has two benefits, the first is that it encourages men to actively question their position, activities, and identities as members of society (Styhre & Tienari, 2013: 198). The second is that through engaging in a process that privileges emotion men are likely to feel feminised (Holmes, 2015: 180), but through a rationalisation of this, those men can come to recognise that the feeling of feminisation is as a result of a deep-seated, and sometimes unwanted, engagement with patriarchy.

Philosopher Michael Lynch argues that it is assumed that reflexivity can do *something*, to reveal forgotten choices, to lay bare epistemological limits, or even empower voices that have been subjugated. However, he also argues that 'what reflexivity does, what it threatens to expose, what it reveals and who it empowers depends upon who does it and how they go about it' (Lynch, 2000: 36). To follow this point further, there is a risk that when white, Western, heterosexual men engage in self-reflexivity, they end up either making their

voice even louder than they already are, or they present themselves as victims. Another potential issue with self-reflexivity is raised by gender scholars Alexander Styhre and Janne Tuenari who argue that self-reflexivity is fragmented. It can only see the story from the position of the subject and is something that is not always under the control of the individual (Styhre & Tienari, 2013: 205).

However these positions are problematic because they emphasise a reactionist view of self-reflexivity, which does not position it as a practice to be continuously undertaken, but, as Katilia and Meriläinen suggest, as something that happens passively to someone (Katilia & Meriläinen, 2013: 212). Instead, self-reflexivity is about having an 'ongoing conversation about your experience, whilst simultaneously living in the moment [and enacting change in the world]' (Hertz, 1997: viii). It is less about 'becoming aware' than it is about always already being aware of the act of self-reflexivity. Recognising that self-reflexivity may be difficult, emotionally constraining and tiresome, Katilia and Meriläinen (2013) argue that it is important to undertake this activity even on the most mundane of experiences. In doing so, it raises questions that emphasise paradoxes, doubts and opportunities. It also expresses unspoken and often unconscious assumptions about our identities that need to be addressed (Katila & Meriläinen, 2013: 215). In this respect, men who engage in self-reflexivity might be seen to be promoting a feminist project in which they are encouraged to consider their own relationship to their body and the bodies of others (Jardine, 2002: 61). This is, unfortunately, something that Acconci did not manage to do.

### **2.5.3: Returning to Spitting Distance as the Self-Reflexive Object-Gaze**

To only be self-reflexive in the second performance of *Spitting Distance* is to assume that the experiences of the first provided me with little information on helping me to understand myself as a masculine subject. However, I argue that because the first performance was mundane in the sense that it raised no concerns in relation to who I am, what I do, and how I operate in the world, means that there is something here that needs unearthing. In the second performance, I experienced my identity as existing in the middle ground of self/other, a place that located me within the in-between of vulnerability, pleasure, anger and eroticism. To not have a word to explain how I felt at these intersections demonstrates the importance of that space, because it undoes our strong bonds with the comparability of the word to the world around us (Jones, 2012: 36). To experience this in-between state, which I articulated as abjection, is to challenge my identity because it opened it up and allowed it to become soft, malleable, and penetrable. To not have this experience in the first performance, afforded me the opportunity to forget my intersubjectivity and instead, I was able to see myself as a cohesive and autonomous subject.

Because Kristeva (1982) notes that the abject acts as a primer for our culture and as a way of collapsing identity, I should have been more aware of the way that I was using the materiality of the abject in *Spitting Distance*. Its cultural alignment with the feminine body at first might suggest that embracing the abject demonstrates an irreverence towards the construction of a white male heterosexual masculine identity (Richmond, 2011: 62). Yet as Fintan Walsh notes, and as I identified in Chapter One, to embrace the abject does not necessarily point towards gender trouble because the performative arc ends at the point of resolution (Walsh, 2013: 179). The resolution for me was

demonstrable in my ability just to accept and not be concerned about the abject in that first performance.

This leads me to my final point, for in his analysis of intimacy in body-based practices Dominic Johnson argues that in performance risk tends to be assessed, managed and 'owned'. 'By owning risk, a performer takes responsibility for the ramifications of one's actions, refusing the masculinist implications of risk, as wild, reckless, or uninhibited' (Johnson, 2012: 129). There is, of course, a difference between the risk associated with Ron Athey's work, say, and the risk of being spat on in a performance. Despite this difference, the context is still the same, by not really considering the power of the abject and its affect on me, my focus seemed to be on my ability to resist violation (Walsh, 2010: 167). Rather than challenging masculinity, I instead demonstrated my ability to perform the symbolic codes associated with it. In this respect, the difference between the first and second performances of *Spitting Distance* is, significantly, my own abjection. As such, and in the spirit of self-reflexion, as a way of avoiding making this same mistake again, I planned to use the self-reflexive abject-gaze as a way of monitoring the extent to which the abject challenged the security of my identity through the making process.

## **Conclusion**

The way that *Spitting Distance* challenged the representations of hegemonic masculinity is through a process of revealing gaps in the construction of my identity. This was evident in the way that the autobiographical narrative that was used as the stimulus for this work was not

directly signified through the performance. Instead, the 'affective force' of that narrative was restored resulting in locating the materiality of my abject body alongside my identity, in the space, and that time, whilst not centralising me within the narrative itself. The problem that did occur though is that abject materials do not necessarily guarantee a destabilisation and as such, to monitor this I employed what I have termed as being the self-reflective abject-gaze. When the abject did cause me abjection, when it did threaten my identity, it was because I found myself located in the in-between space of self/other. By performatively producing an intersubjective space within *Spitting Distance* my experiences of shame and anxiety demonstrated a challenge to the construction of my masculine identity because it promoted a self that was fragmented, penetrable and permeable; it raised the point that the masculine subject is not autonomous, but rather multiple.

Considering these observations, as I go into Chapter Three, my focus is on how I can deliberately open up the gaps associated with intersubjectivity even further, and identify why the body might be useful in achieving this. I am also interested in how the experiences of shame and anxiety, which were so important in *Spitting Distance* because of the way they challenged the coherence of my masculine identity, can be made more explicit in the performance space. This latter point is particularly pertinent because the destabilisation of my own masculine identity risks becoming inward focussed, solipsistic and self-indulgent. As such, the following chapter is concerned with how the male body can be considered as its own signifying sign system, and how that system might be used to disrupt the symbolic codes of masculinity by evoking intersubjectivity.



## Chapter 3: Performing the Male Body as Penetrable and Open.

She lets the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak—the tongue, sound without barrier or death (Cixous, 2003: 44)

The purpose of this chapter is to critically reflect upon the second performance of this doctoral research project, *Talking about Keith* (2013), as a way of identifying how, and why, the male body might be used to open up representations of masculinity. Drawing upon the work of feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous, and on Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), I explore how the excess of male corporeal signification can prise apart the symbolic representations of one's identity as a way of challenging the codes of hegemonic masculinity. In this chapter, I propose that one way of achieving this is through a signifying process that metonymically replaces corporeal experiences into the performance space. I argue here that what emerges from this approach is a type of somatic language that can safeguard the male body from becoming a phallic image.

### 3.1 Talking about Keith

*Talking about Keith* was the second piece of work for this doctoral project. It was a seventeen-minute performance that was presented twice on the same day at the University of Plymouth, once in a female public toilet and once in a male. In both performances, the audience consisted of mixed sexed groups, and neither toilets were closed for public use through the duration of the performance; as I go on to note later, this particular aspect of the performance raised concerns for some members of the public. The purpose of *Talking about*

*Keith* was to identify a process that opened up further the symbolic codes of masculinity. The aims of the performance were:

- To explore through practice how one might use the body to open up representations of masculinity in the performance space.
- To experiment with the body as its own signifying sign system and to explore its relationship to the symbolic.
- To explore how Lacan's concept of the phallus can be reconsidered in the destabilisation of masculine identity in performance.

### **3.1.1: Approaching Talking about Keith**

There were three stages to the construction of this performance, which are outlined in the structure of this chapter. The first was to critically reflect upon and explore in more detail how my identity was opened up in *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012) (also see Chapter Two). To achieve this, I reflect upon *Spitting Distance* not through Ferdinand de Saussure's influential signifying sign system, but rather through Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia (2009) and then through Julia Kristeva's (1984) theory of intertextuality. I chose these two concepts because, whilst Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (2012) outlines the potential structuring of the sign through proposition of the signifier and the signified, it does not take into account how utterances are striated with different historical and social texts (Bakhtin, 2009: 76).

While Bakhtin claims that language is multiple as a result of being striated, Kristeva develops his theory further to argue that textuality is more than

the social, it is also of the body in the form of drives, feelings, and emotions that are in excess of language (Kristeva, 1984: 24). Her position can also be usefully aligned to Cixous who calls for a feminine writing that comes from the body and which works against a dominant discourse where language is used to close down meaning and to categorise. Like Kristeva, Cixous calls for a writing of pleasure in excess of language (Cixous, 2003a: 132), one that promotes plurality and exchange as a way to accept the alterity within self (Dobson, 1996: 21). It is the process of writing through the body, the process of focussing on the viscera, orifices, feelings and emotions, that affords, as the epigraph at the top of this chapter suggests, the self to be opened up. In doing so, because the body can only be captured in the symbolic through metaphor and metonym (both of these terms will be attended to later) gaps are created in the written text where the voice of others can come through, in Chapter Four I refer to this practice in part as generosity.

The second approach was to find ways in which to write from the male body in performance as a way of opening up, rather than closing down meaning. Such an approach was achieved by exploring my relationship to my semen over four small performances to camera, of which three are discussed in this chapter. Semen was used over and above other bodily fluids because, similar to the way menstrual blood is culturally defined as being that of the female body, it is a fluid associated with the male's. This oppositional binary is an important one, because discourses concerning menstruation as 'dirty', 'vile', 'impure', and 'polluting' have had a significant impact on Western women (Giles, 2010: 35). Conversely, semen is not considered to be as polluting as menstrual blood, for culturally it has been valorised as a form of humanity (Aristotle, 2013), aligned

with the mind (Leonardo, 2004), and is also a cultural marker for feminine pleasure in pornography (Williams, 1989). Semen is culturally seen by some men as not a bodily fluid, but rather as the object it produces (Grosz, 1994). The purpose of exploring semen in this chapter is to challenge the stability of these assumptions and to make evident the polluting potential of this male fluid.

The final approach in constructing *Talking About Keith* was to identify a way to 'capture' the anxiety that was experienced in the previous experiments in the form of a public performance. The concept of anxiety is an important one to me because along with disassociation, toil 'and a crippling somatic self-consciousness' it challenges a normative understanding of masculine identity (Sedgwick, 1985: 171). It provides an analogous relationship with, but one that is not identical to, the struggles that females and other peripheralised subjects have had to encounter in relation to patriarchy and the men that support this system (Lemons & Neumeister, 2013: 511). To achieve this struggle and anxiety the thetic space, which is outlined in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva, 1982), was used because its ambiguity as a passageway affords the possibility for bodily drives to seep through and pollute the symbolic.

### **3.2: Spitting Distance as an Example of Heteroglossic Language Systems**

The articulation of a masculine subject in Lacan's (2001a) sexuation matrix means that "I" might be considered as a 'dark straight bar' and a 'shadow' (Woolf, 2014, para. 14), a type of signature that is haunted by maleness (Kamuf, 2002, para. 79). This position sees "I" as phallogocentric, a term articulated by Jacques Derrida, which combines logocentrism, the process of privileging the

written word, and phallogocentrism, which is a gendering of language through a masculinist, or phallic, and patriarchal agenda (Derrida, 1998: 1xix). When considered alongside the phallic/penis conflation in Chapter One, phallogocentrism allows some male subjects into the symbolic and grants them power to close down, and control, meaning (Thomas, 2008: 68). As such it is a logic that oppresses and silences women, and other marginalised subjects.

Yet Chapter Two identified that one's understanding of self is not autonomous in the manner that phallogocentrism might suggest. Rather, subjectivity is constructed not just through the way that I wish to be perceived, but also in the ways that others see me, and how they engage with me in that space at that time. What *Spitting Distance* offered me then was the knowledge that one's body does not securely signify one's gendered identity, rather it projects a multiplicity of signs that can be defined through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. This term takes into account that in reality signs, including those that help to construct an understanding of a gendered self, are not unitary (monoglossic), but stratified with a variety of social layers. Signs are not an abstract linguistic concept, but the subject's dialogic consciousness within the world (Bakhtin, 2009: 74).

The term dialogic is not meant to suggest a dialogue between two people, instead, it means 'double-voicedness', and connotes how different voices affect each other and how meaning is made through a process of listening and speaking (Lachmann, 2005: 47). Language dialogically sits between self and other, individuals communicate by affecting each other, in that my communication with you is always based on the anticipation of you and vice versa (Bakhtin, 2009: 77). As a result of it being about the relationship of

communication, Bakhtin's concept means that meaning is striated because it is affected by individuals as a result of their different geographical locations, and the social structures they participate within (Bakhtin, 2009: 75). In this respect, heteroglossia suggests that meaning is always multiple and works against the illusion of monoglossia, which is a unitary language enforced and neutralised by hegemony (Francis, 2012a: 4).

Although Bakhtin used his concept of heteroglossia in the analysis of novels, it is also utilised by some gender scholars as a tool for destabilising hegemonic thought. Becky Francis for example explicitly uses the concept of monoglossia to define 'masculinist social epistemologies', which define gender as fixed, stable, and essentialist (Francis, 2012: 5). Gender heteroglossia, conversely, can be seen as a process of code swapping, or mixing, gender characteristics, behaviours and traits. This is implied by Judith Butler in her articulation of drag, which 'subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gendered identity' (Butler, 2007: 209).

Furthermore, heteroglossia is also reflected in those individuals who actively seek to challenge traditional gender distinctions, such as those who define themselves as genderqueers, by collapsing traditional gender boundaries (Mayo, 2007: 55). Although, genderqueer is not just about moving between gender categories, but about moving outside of them to offer a new understanding of gender altogether (Tate et al., 2013: 768). This is not just in relation to appearance, but also mannerisms and character traits including tone of voice, language hobbies and interests (Chang, 2006: 255). Yet Sociologist Emma Perry notes that even if a subject does not actively embrace gender

heteroglossia, they cannot avoid it. This is because while dominant institutions are binarised and monoglossic, individual gender representations contain tensions and contradictions as a result of one's interactions with others (Perry, 2013: 409).

Bakhtin's concepts of monoglossia and heteroglossia are very much present in *Spitting Distance*. One might read, for example, the different roles of artist, participant and spectator as an additional social layer to the already striated process of meaning making. The different ways in which individuals acted and reacted towards each other, laughing, flinching, groaning, the cheering when one person did something the rest enjoyed. It also considers the elements of self that we cannot perceive of each other. The narratives that we bring into the space with us that exist from another time, for example, the way that our families have brought us up to engage with different races, classes, genders and sexes; or, the way that those teachings have been modified by individuals to suit their identity preferences. Even our life histories and personal experiences of something as mundane as spittle would have affected the way that *Spitting Distance* was engaged with. All of this was used to make a text that was written and read by all. A 'text' which is 'shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents' (Bakhtin, 2009: 75).

### **3.2.1: Meaning Making Through the Body**

Bakhtin's articulation of heteroglossia focuses on the different kinds of speech that exist in communication, however, I am interested in how meaning might be multiplied by considering the dialogic relationship between the codes of the body, and the performative codes and codifications of a gendered identity.

Importantly, I am not talking about body language here as I argue that this is an already codified system of communication that is taken into consideration through Bakhtin's heteroglossic exchange. Instead, I am pointing to those aspects of the body that exceed symbolic signification, aspects that in Chapter One I referred to as the *objet petit a*. The codes of the body that might exist outside of linguistic constraints could include corporeal reactions like gaging, sighing, and bloating, or might also refer to deep visceral feelings. Following Kristeva's argument, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia relies on a 'repression' and 'rationalisation' of linguistics in modernism, which focuses on the mental aspects of the speaking subject (Kristeva, 1980b: 24). This logocentric approach to thinking about communication stabilises and privileges a differentiating process that promotes oppositional binaries (Cixous, 2003b: 37), which ironically Bakhtin (2009) might refer to as monoglossic.

I argue that the repression of bodily codes and codifications re-enforces emphasis on the symbolic codes of hegemonic understandings of gender. I do not mean to suggest here that the body is ignored, rather the externality of differently sexed bodies come to represent particular gender norms. As discussed in Chapter One, in the West male corporeality becomes focused on muscularity and in turn control, whereas female corporeality comes to represent embodiment and ambiguity. Whilst these corporeal representations in and of themselves might be heteroglossic, for as Connell (2005) notes, gender operates at the intersection of different social structures, I see them as also aligning uncomfortably with a mind/body dualistic split. That is, through normative thinking, gendered identities are only constructed and defined through linguistic texts and not felt. The problem with this approach is that it



gives the false impression of male bodies as knowable and therefore coherent entities, something which is discussed further in Chapter Four.

Following on from this point, I question why heteroglossia is only aligned with different social strata, and why it is not located with the way that our bodies can affect how communication happens. To consider heteroglossia in this way would make sense, for as Estelle Barrett notes, language is a material process as it always comes from and to our bodies, (Barrett, 2011: 7). To only think of gender as a series of symbolic codes that are completely separate from the body does not account for how embodied experiences of gender affect how we perceive ourselves, how others perceive us, and how we perceive them. Therefore, Bakhtin's heteroglossia does not account for the way my feelings and visceral experiences affect the way in which I communicate with others and how this, and their own corporeal experiences, affects how others receive that communication. In short, heteroglossia does not account for the way that our bodies might bubble over into our use of language.

What I am suggesting is that the body itself produces signs that do not necessarily fit comfortably within the symbolic world; moreover, I am suggesting that both of these realms affect each other. '[B]odies produce language, just as language helps the body to produce the field of cultural intelligibility in which bodies make their appearance' (Thomas, 1996: 29). In this respect I see my embodied experiences of masculinity as what Kristeva refers to as intertextual<sup>20</sup> (Kristeva, 1980a: 38). She describes this as being a '*poetic language*', which

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<sup>20</sup> Later in her thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva revises this term because 'it has often been understood in the banal sense of "study of sources," [instead] we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation [...] of enunciative and donative positionality (Original emphasis Kristeva, 1984: 60).

focuses on the pre-linguistic, the rhythms, enunciations, or any sign that operates at the margins while also affecting the linguistic (Kristeva, 1980b: 25). Intertextuality is about how we take the conscious and the unconscious, the mind and the body, culture and nature seriously and as necessary in the forming of meaning (Robbins, 2000: 127).

During *Spitting Distance*, there were a number of occasions where I experienced rhythms, feelings, pulses and emotions in my body that later allowed me to make sense of the performance. In the last few moments when those three individuals came up to me and dribbled on my penis, spat sputum onto my chest and spat whisky in my face, as I discussed previously in Chapter Two, my body reacted. In addition to feeling the effects of their actions on the surface of my skin, the spit running down the inside of my leg, the smell of different people's saliva on my body, which was also mixed in with whiskey and beer<sup>21</sup>, I could also feel my skin tingle, and my stomach clench. I took deep but unsteady breaths in through my nose, which I tried on a number of occasions to correct, but failed. Even a year later I continued to feel the effects of *Spitting Distance* on my body. When a colleague of mine commented about the photo documentation from the performance being online (see Chapter Two), my breathing became laboured, my eyes began to shift in their sockets, I could feel my skin heating up, and I started to pick the skin off of the bottom of my lip with my teeth.

While I named these corporeal experiences anxiety and shame in Chapter Two, these emotions are not actually those terms at all, although they do go some way in producing them. So whilst linguistic theory accounts for both

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<sup>21</sup> In the second phase of the performance, where individuals were invited to spit into my cupped hands some individuals refused and instead poured beer in instead.

the structure of the sign (Saussure, 2012) and how it is communicated between subjects (Bakhtin, 2009), Kristeva argues that no sign system accounts for how these bodily drives affect language (Kristeva, 1984: 22). Kristeva's answer to this problem is to outline how intertextuality has two interrelating systems that affect meaning making; the symbolic, which is a formal study of language as an object, and the semiotic, which are the codes of the body that exist outside of any linguistic system (Kristeva, 1984: 29). Most importantly, these systems are not separate as there are always traces of our materiality in the symbolic (Kristeva, 1984: 27).

Albeit not speaking directly to Kristeva's work, there are elements of intertextuality in Hélène Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine*. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous identifies a mode of writing, which she refers to as feminine writing. Its qualities are in contrast to a phallogocentric approach, which privileges the symbolic because it works in binary oppositions and is hierarchically defined (Cixous, 2003b: 38). *Écriture féminine*, on the other hand, is about plurality because it focuses on the body, its pleasures and as such aims to challenge phallogocentrism (Cixous, 2003a: 132). It achieves this through its emphasis on the living, breathing, speaking body (Cixous, 1984: 547), and producing writing as passageways, entrances and exits where the other resides (Cixous, 2003b: 42). Writing in this way is not about owning meaning as phallogocentrism does, it is about giving pleasure to the other, opening one's self up to allow writing to operate in excess of the symbolic (Cixous, 2003b: 43).

Calvin Thomas argues in *Male Matters* that phallogocentrism can be seen in opposition to abjection, 'since phallogocentrism does, in fact, assume

with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding the abject [...] (Thomas, 1996: 22). What he means by this is that phallogocentric language closes down meaning by attempting to reject anything that is ambiguous or sits at the margins. It is possible to see similarities in Thomas' articulation of the production of language and the creation of phallic masculinity as discussed in Chapter One, for both attempt to create coherent boundaries in order to control meaning. His use of Kristeva's term abject (see Chapters One and Two) in *Powers of Horror* (1982) is metaphorical for it refers to the opening up of language for the audience through the process of creating holes and the embracement of excess, which is discussed further in Chapter Four. His use of the abject as a metaphor here is important though because it also evokes focus on the body and its organic matters as causing abjection.

When considering Cixous' (2003) epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, and my exploration of performing a masculine identity that is opened up by the male body, the notion of 'allowing the other tongue of a thousand tongues speak' starts to suggest an exploration of the ambiguous male body. If the phallus can be conflated with the penis, as was discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, then the gaps that exist that the phallus cannot cover, that phallogocentrism tries to close down, might metonymically be linked to the anus; this is a useful link, as the male anus is a site of destabilization for normative masculinity (Waldby, 2002: 268). The anus challenges hegemony in this way because culturally, and as noted in Chapter One through my reading of Gilbert and George, anal eroticism carries with it disturbingly feminine connotations, the anus is soft and sensitive and is associated with pollution and shame (Waldby, 2002: 272). Metaphorically speaking, if an anus can be

penetrated and opened up with a thousand tongues, then the abject fluidity and ambiguity of my identity can become exposed.

### 3.3 Male Materiality

While Waldby (2002) describes the anus as the soft, vulnerable spot on the male body, and Ron Athey (2015) refers to it as a political weapon (see Chapter One), my focus in *Talking about Keith* was my penis. As discussed in Chapter One, Lacan's ambiguity in defining the phallus (2001a) has enabled men to associate its power with their penis (Gallop, 1990: 127). As such, that particular part of the male anatomy has come to represent something that is solid, hard, powerful and productive. One way of challenging the penis/phallus conflation in performance is to reveal the penis as never being able to meet the demands of the phallus. One might demonstrate this in a similar manner to Robert Morris' approaches in the 1960s and 1970s, where he hid his penis while simultaneously restoring the phallus into his photographic images, as outlined in Chapter One. Although, Morris also offers an alternative approach through his work *I-Box (open)* (1962), here he aligns his penis with hegemonic masculinity by locating his naked body behind a wooden "I". However, by flaunting his flaccid penis (with the wooden door open), he also demonstrates a defiance to the production of phallic masculinity by exposing the penis/phallus conflation (Jones, 1994: 55).

Another way of challenging the penis/phallus conflation is by revealing the similarities that the penis has with the anus. Robert Mapplethorpe's image *Lou, N.Y.C* (1978) is a black and white photograph that frames a male body from the waist down to the top of the thighs. In this image, a male model holds

his erect penis with one hand while sticking the little finger of his other into the urethra. What I find striking about this image is the way that it captures both the penetrating and penetrable potential of the male body, as well as challenging the symbolic codes of masculinity. Although, whilst unlike Morris' flaccid penis in *I-Box (open)*, the model's erect penis is still not indicative of the way that Lacan (2001a) articulates the phallus. This is partly because the large wrist and veiny fist that holds his penis overwrites the penis/phallus conflation, as it becomes the turgid, rod-like symbol of the phallus. Even the model's little finger has more phallic potential than his penis does because it is his finger that is acting as the copula between two domains by linking the inside of the body with the outside.

It is because Mapplethorpe's photograph makes explicit the penis as being soft, vulnerable, and penetrable that for me he aligns it with the anus. In a similar manner, Peggy Phelan in *Mourning Sex* observes the way that 'Mapplethorpe spreads the light between the fanned fingers of the model in the way a pornographer might spread the buttocks and stop the light at the point of entry' (Phelan, 1997: 37). By being exposed as that other vulnerable spot on the male body, *Lou, N.Y.C* reconsiders the erotic pleasures associated with the penis by relocating them to its orifice. Because of this, the image also shifts my focus from thinking of the penis as the site of 'vital flow as it is transmitted in generation' (Lacan, 2001a: 319), to a site where waste is emitted.

### **3.3.1: The Cultural Representation of Semen**

In my making process for *Talking about Keith*, I was interested in how Mapplethorpe's image challenged the concept of phallic masculinity by emphasising how the penis cannot stand for the male body as a coherent and

closed system. This is because all orifices allow for a movement of waste from the inside of the body to the outside. The waste that I was interested in exploring was semen, not just because it is the bodily fluid that is aligned with male corporeality, but also because in order for the penis to be associated with the phallus semen has to become culturally displaced. This position is echoed by Elizabeth Grosz who questions why semen does not qualify as the objet petit a of the penis (Grosz, 1994: 199). She continues to note that:

Phenomenology is generally displaced in favor of externalisation, medicalization, solidification. Seminal fluid is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a casual agent and thus a thing, a solid: it's fluidity, it's potential seepage, the element in it that is uncontrollable, its spread, its formlessness is perpetually displaced in discourse onto its properties, its capacity to fertilize, to father, to produce an object (Grosz, 1994: 199)

Grosz's observation on the discursive displacement of semen is demonstrable through the way in which cultural practices, such as pornography, science and art, have chosen to present that bodily fluid. In pornography, for example, one of its functions is to act as a reference for pleasure. However, the problem encountered in pornography is that whilst pleasure in the normative male orgasm is more often than not deemed demonstrable through the production of ejaculate, there is no such visual signification for the female orgasm that is quite so culturally secure (Thomas, 1996: 19). As Elizabeth Grosz describes in her essay *Animal Sex*, when in the hope of raising the 'languid pleasures and intense particularities of the female orgasm' she has to eventually abandon her project. This is partly because at the very most what she could produce 'would or could be read largely as autobiography, as the 'true confessions' of my own experience and have little more than anecdotal

value' (Grosz, 2002: 279). In this context, and as experienced in pornography, the female orgasm then is elusive, for it exceeds signification in the symbolic.

To overcome this, the male performer ejaculates onto the body of the female performer so that his semen can become a signifier for her pleasure. Despite her request for it in hardcore pornography though, it is not for her eyes, rather it is for the eyes of the male performer and those watching at home (Williams, 1989: 101). This is because if timed correctly it signifies the ending, the final climax, and linearity of the pornographic experience (Aydemir, 2007: 97). However, the ejaculating penis is both spectacular and also 'helplessly specular', for whilst it aims to mark her pleasure it never does (Williams, 1989: 93). In this respect, there is a type of 'failure' associated with semen, as it simply cannot be the celestial, celebrated object that historically men have positioned it as being (Aristotle, 2013: para. 2.1).

Instead, it is an example of phallic jouissance, for whilst there is desire for semen to be demonstrable of her pleasure within the symbolic when the male subject does ejaculate it fails to achieve this fully. As a result, disappointment ensues for the masculine subject because, as Lacan notes, one's desires have not been met by one's demands (Lacan, 1998: 7). It is for this reason that in pornography the camera stops soon after the point where the male ejaculate lands on the body of the female performer. It is not because ejaculate is the full stop in pornographic pleasure, it is because if filming continued it would be possible to see semen being mopped up, disposed of, and becoming waste (Thomas, 1996: 23).



### 3.4: Talking about Keith Performance Processes

My process for making *Talking about Keith* was in two parts. The first was to create a number of small video performance experiments that afforded me the opportunity to explore the materiality of my semen and to identify the experiences that emerged as a result of this. The second part was to take my experiences and use them to score a performance. The performance experiments would be performed in private to camera and consisted of approximately ten minutes of 'action'. In response to the findings in Chapter Two, I employed a self-reflexive abject-gaze as a strategy to monitor the abject potential of my semen and the affect that this had on me. With this in mind, after each experiment, I would immediately reflect to camera with the purpose of articulating how I felt during each performance. While both performances and reflections were filmed, I also engaged in a writing process that helped me to analyse my experiences, which would then affect how I would engage with the following performance experiment. A selection of the videos and reflections can be found on the accompanying DVD in Appendix D, and the transcripts of the experiments in Appendix B.

I am aware that what follows does not sit comfortably within the codes and codifications of traditional academic thought. Rather than pinning down, closing down and articulating my experiences through what one might expect to be an 'appropriate' language for a doctoral thesis, my aim, as implied earlier in this chapter, is to allow my body to loosen scholarly languages; and I do this by writing in the way that I experience my body, that is sloppy, familiar, but sometimes alien (Benedetto, 2007: 126). I write in the following section to open up meaning, to set it free with metaphor, metonym and rhythms. To write in a

way that captures not only the anxiety and confusion that I experienced but also those moments in which my body does those 'things' that simply exceed the boundaries of scholarly language. I am doing this because there is no other way in which I can communicate these experiences to you; for 'traditional' academic language unsympathetically outlines the practicalities of these experiments without exposing their intimacies.

### **3.4.1: Experiment 1: Ejaculation**

All of these experiments start in my bedroom a familiar place for the action that is to ensue for it is here where, on a number of occasions, I have found myself disseminating "myself" into bodies, rags, or over my hand. In this instance though the comfort of my bed has been replaced with a hard, cold and dusty laminate floor. With a sterile sample pot in one hand, I desperately try to get an erection with the other. The combination of porn playing in the background, the prospect of producing a 'sample', and the sound of my dog pottering about on the other side of the door, is making this much more difficult than usual. There is a moment, albeit a flashing one, where my dog becomes my mother when I'm sixteen. When finally she wins with her corporeal display, the woman on my laptop not the one in my mind, I start my camera to start my own. Soon it happens, my stomach clenches, my groin thrusts forward, my balls tighten, and I exhale to the feeling of that sample pot getting hot.

Unlike my moment of pleasure, there is nothing fast about "me" sliding down that plastic container, yet my pace and materiality does not give me the same abject horror as the image of, say, a slug. I do not, when I look at "me", think of slime or formlessness either in the sense that "I" have no form or in Bataille's understanding of it, for in this moment "I" am not nothing, "I" am not a

slug, or a squashed spider, or spit (Bataille, 1985: 31). In fact under these lights, “I” am opulent thick, pearlescent, and “I” glisten as much as “I” am warm. “I” am, as Aristotle noticed over two thousand years ago, almost celestial (Aristotle, 2013, para. 2.1). For it is “me”, he says that produces the human’s mental capacities, whereas “my” cultural opposite, menstrual blood is used to construct the materiality of the body (Aristotle, 2013, para. 2.1). In false celebration of this logic, Leonardo da Vinci draws my passageway from the brain, to the testes, to the penis (Leonardo, 2004).

It turns out that “I” am also delicate. If left to cool down “I” quickly lose these qualities and become darker and more like water (Aristotle, 2013, para. 2.3). If left for a few days “I” split, “I” lay on top of “my” watery liquid as a series of small-congealed lumps of white matter. This separation of protein from secretion occurs after spermatozoa have been carried to the egg so that those germ cells can be free for fertilisation to happen. Although even after this split, I am still interested in “me”. I am not repulsed by the watery liquid sloshing about in the bottom of that test tube, I am not anxious, sickened or repulsed by the congealed blobs. This is because as Gordon Allport notes, for our own bodily fluid to become abject, for the individual to be repulsed by it, what leaks from our body must first be displaced (Allport, 1955: 43, in Arya, 2014: 49).

### **3.4.2: Experiment 2: Displacing Semen**

“I” always flow away from me. On the occasions where I’m not quite cleaned up quick enough “I” may slide over me or under me, but “I” always flow out, and away from the inside of my body. “I” never slip back over those borders from where “I” once came from. For a long time, the way that I sensed myself in the world meant that to allow semen, not just mine, to slip back into

my body, I am ashamed to say, meant that I thought I would become someone else. And so I am once again in that cold, hard dusty place, my trousers around my ankles, my penis throbbing, my anus clenching, my face tightening, and my hand, once again, becoming warm. This time that same hand, with "me" an ominous liquid in a transparent test tube, lets "me" make my way towards me, but this time back over a different boundary. As "I" make my way towards me, I start to become nervous, as a once celestial liquid "I" now seem thicker, gloopier, and "my" slow movement down the test tube makes the moment where "I" hit the back of my throat all the more painful.

At first "I" taste like the gym, but more viscous. But the more "I" rest, the more "I" spread myself into the back of my throat, the more "I" slide across my tongue, and the more "I" find the crevices of my mouth, the more I find me/"me" disgusting. Finally, I swallow "me" and in doing so the trail of slime that "I" leave behind "me" coats my throat as "I" continue to slide down my gullet. My stomach is tightening up, my mouth is salivating, and my tongue slips and slides across the roof of my mouth. My body tries to bring up that wretched stuff that was "me", and still is "me", but that feeling will not go. "My"/semen has been displaced, and now there is a heavy stone in my stomach. Water does not relieve that/"my" trace.

### **3.4.3: Experiment 3: Cum Drops**

If to move over a boundary and back again caused me to experience abjection, then I hoped that moving out, and in, and then out again would cause me more. With my head between my legs and "me", frozen, in the palm of my hand, "I" am slid up into my rectum right up to the knuckle. There are occasions when I press firmly on my anus to increase my orgasm. In this instance

although having already come, and now "I" am in a freezer, frozen, waiting for tomorrow, there is something pleasurable in the feeling of having my anus clamp round my finger for the first time. The idea was that over the space of a couple of minutes, "I" melt and slowly dribble out of my rectum onto my floor creating a small but manageable puddle of watery mess. Instead for a long time my anus withheld the frozen load and refused to allow "me" to have safe passage back even after I had squatted down to allow my buttocks to part, and gravity to work.

My stomach was gurgling, which worried me because I wondered what threats "me", frozen, might pose to the inside of my body. I realised the irrationality of this thought and instead to alleviate my stress I squat once again and reinsert my finger in the hope to find "me" still there, still hard, and still okay. Instead, I feel nothing but cold liquid against the warm skin of my rectum. I pause. For I am anxious about what happens next. I pull my finger out, my once frozen secretion, bought with it, like it once did before, new material. However, rather than spermatozoa, a new "I" emerged as a sloppy spermy piece of faeces. Lying on the floor looking at me I can't help but look back at "me", "us", it, to smell it or "me", a strange mixture of chlorine and shit, which crosses my body for a final time. Not prepared for this level of mess, I do my reflection with that composite "me" staring at me, penetrating my nose. I then get changed and reluctantly leave "me" there in my bedroom so I can get cleaning products to clear "me" away. Quickly.

### **3.5 Creating Passageways for Other Tongues to Speak Through**

Using these visceral experiences as stimuli, my aim was to create a performance that used my body as a signifying sign system, which challenged the logic of symbolic language. In doing so, I hoped that my body would help to open up representations of masculinity and in turn destabilise the coherence of hegemonic ideology. My approach was threefold, in the first instance, I used Phelan's (1997) definition of affective force, as discussed in Chapter Two, to locate my central experiences of those performance experiments, for example, my sensations, feelings, and visceral responses. I then tried to find ways to express them without direct signification through my body in the space. My strategy in doing this was to consider two key areas. The first was the privileging of metonym over metaphor as a making strategy, and the second was the use of Julia Kristeva's (1984) *thetic space* to emphasise the movement between semiotic and the symbolic.

My final strategy was to take my body as a signifying sign system and write those experiences into the performance space. My approach here was similar to that of performance writing, a term that was developed at Dartington College in the 1970s (Allsopp, 1997: 77). Ric Allsopp argues that performance writing is not predicated on the ideas of playwriting or the studying of plays, rather it is about the continued questioning of the uses of writing for performance (Allsopp, 1999: 77). It is about writing that exists beyond the page that is not just about the notation of words, but rather the writing of an entire range of languages that are based in sound, in architectural space, and, in or on the body (Allsopp, 1997: 50). The purpose of it is to question the authority of language, through language, as well as beyond language (Bergvall, 1996: 7).

One of the ways in which *Taking about Keith* approached this was through the incorporation of two key ideas of performance writing<sup>22</sup>. That being, to allow the acts of reading and writing to occur in the space simultaneously, by writing my experiences of the experiments through my body in the moment of performance. In showing the act of writing as emerging and materially equivalent, rather than having already happened and privileging the mode of writing (Bergvall, 1996: 5), the audience is free to interpret my acts as they happen (Allsopp, 1999: 78). In *Talking about Keith* what this meant in practice was that I would re-perform my previous experiments in the performance space, without giving a temporal context to them, or referring to them in direct-address. Instead, I would use my body to locate my own past experiences of the experiments in the present moment of performance, a strategy that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. In addition to this, I scored the performance in such a way that I revealed information as the work progressed; I imagine this to be similar to writing on a page where letters become words, which become sentences, and then paragraphs. The aim was to performatively produce the simultaneous acts of writing and reading in the hope that this would open up the meaning-making processes for *Talking about Keith*.

### **3.5.1: Metonym**

To achieve a privileging of metonym over metaphor (2004) my strategy was to return to Lacan and his articulation of how the self is constructed through language. My decision to do this was based on the observation that much of the past scholarly writing around representations of masculinity in male body art has relied on the relationship between male artists and the metaphor of the

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<sup>22</sup> The scores for each performance can be found in Appendix C

phallus. However, in *The Agency of the Letter* (Lacan, 2001b), Lacan uses Roman Jakobson's *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances* (Jakobson, 1990) as a foundation for his concept of subjectivity, which was outlined in Chapter One, and in it Lacan identifies two ways in which subjectification occurs. The first way, as already described in Chapter one, is through the phallus and as such it uses Jakobson's notion of metaphor where one thing replaces another (Jakobson, 1990: 126). This explains Lacan's observation of the differences between desire and demand, for he notes that desires are the feelings of the body that exist outside of any linguistic system. For them to be attended to these bodily desires must be overwritten by demand, which operates in the domain of the symbolic (Lacan, 2001a: 317). Although the phallic object never quite achieves the desires of the subject this process still makes clear how the metaphor is both hierarchical and, in turn, indicative of normative masculinity. I propose this because the phallus aims to make sense of the objet petit a, the 'thing' that can never be known by the subject.

Aligning himself with Jakobson once more, Lacan offers an alternative to the metaphor. He notes that whilst the signifiers in the phallic metaphor are not equal, 'the occulted signifier [remains] present though its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain' (Lacan, 2001b: 173). By metonym Lacan means signifiers that have, in a similar manner to metaphor, been re-placed by other signifiers. However, rather than repressing desire as the metaphor does through hierarchy, the metonym displaces it by reducing all signifiers to the same level (Jakobson, 1990: 128). In common parlance, "boiling the kettle" is a useful example of the metonym because it creates an equal relationship between the water and the kettle, despite the former being replaced by the



latter. Instead of assuming that the phallic object replaces the latent feelings of the body, desires are seen as being based on a chain of substitutions where the first object of desire generates a potentially infinite chain of substitutes. Furthermore, this displacement ensures that the repressed terms always remain in relation to the subject's language, which explains how the unconscious can speak through the conscious (Grosz, 1990: 100).

Jakobson notes that both metonymy and metaphor are necessary for meaningful language to occur and the absence of one could result in the linguistic disturbance of aphasia (Jakobson, 1990: 131). However, the breakdown of linguistic functions is precisely the point of *Talking about Keith*, for the symbolic can be visualised as a hierarchical metaphor that represses the body and this needed to be challenged. Furthermore, it does so in an attempt to close down meaning in order to give the impression of a unified subject, who is in complete control, and therefore this process can also be aligned with the conditions that patriarchy attempts to apply to normative masculinity. Metonymy on the other hand, which is in a constant process of displacement, can open up meaning and ambiguity, for as Jakobson notes to only communicate in metonymy risks the reader being 'crushed by the multiplicity of detail unloaded on him [*sic*]' (Jakobson, 1990: 132).

### **3.5.2: Performing Metonymy**

My strategy was to avoid the hierarchical structuring of the metaphor and instead create a series of images that metonymically reference my experience of semen. In the early stages of the rehearsal process, I attempted to recreate the taste and



*Figure 3 1: Metonymically Replacing Semen with Salt and Water in Mouth in Talking About Keith*

texture of my semen by mixing water and salt in my mouth and allowing it to overflow as seen in Figure 3.1. As the process went on, I found more abstract metonyms, for example, the touching of the wooden stool covered in salt and water,



*Figure 3 2: Metonymically Referencing Touching my Faeces in Talking About Keith*

which referenced the touching of my stool that slipped out from my anus as seen in Figure 3.2. This strategy was also used to reference the feelings of anxiety that I experienced through the process, particularly when consuming my semen. However, rather than metonymically referencing my experiences with sensorial ones anxiety and shame were annexed through the location of the work.

The choice to locate *Talking about Keith* in public toilets at the University of Plymouth was informed by the idea that the private activities that are engaged with in those types of spaces are ambiguous and have the potential to cause anxiety. This is due to the terms private and public being taught to us from a very young age, where we are told, for example, that our genitals are our privates and that we should go to the toilet on our own, as such the word private can be associated with shame (Warner, 2005: 23). On a very obvious level, male toilets specifically, are sites that contain special rules about visibility and invisibility, and they are spaces that eliminate dirt but are also considered dirty (Barcan, 2005: 11). Judith Butler makes a more nuanced reading of the anxiety experienced around public toilets when she notes that toilets, when marked “men” and “women”, in most cases, require individuals to publically conform to a particular normative sex, which is then monitored on entering the space (Butler, 1993: 10). To not adhere to the policing that occurs in these spaces is to risk being excluded from the heterosexual matrix that privileges some people more than others.

In addition to this, male public toilets may also be seen as erotically charged spaces, and theatres of heterosexual anxiety. In part, this is because there is a history of some public toilets being used as "Tearooms" by some gay men (Bapst, 2001: 91). It is the architecture of these spaces that allows them to become erotised, for whilst it is a space where sex in public can occur, the seclusion of the cubicles also make privacy possible. It is the eroticisation of the public/private boundary that Jeyasingham argues makes sex in public toilets so attractive (2010: 313). Having said this, the eroticisation of the space is obviously not the purpose of the architecture; for the public toilet is designed to

‘disavow the presence of a contaminating homosexuality’ (Barcan, 2005: 11). By keeping the buttocks assigned to the privacy of the stalls, and by keeping the penis out in the open (but still veiled by the segregation of the urinals and trousers), the public toilet hopes to banish the spectre of homosexuality (Barcan, 2005: 11).

The other reason why public toilets are erotically charged spaces is because of a male anxiety based around the display of the penis at the urinal. While the buttocks may be covered, the penis is not completely, and as such, there is always the risk of it being looked at. On one level the anxiety that may arise from this threat might be because the cultural celebration of the large penis has located the penis as a source of self-image, which in turn may affect some men (del Rosso, 2011: 708). This is made particularly pertinent with the plethora of medical help advertisements for those males that have erectile dysfunction, or small flaccid penises. What is revealed through the public toilet is that penis size (and function), for some men, does matter, and this has a direct correlation to how masculine they might feel. However, the anxiety associated with the size of one’s penis is compounded by the unarticulated normative rules that govern behaviour in that space. To check your penis against another man’s whilst in the public toilet may cause anxiety, for sexuality unlike race or sex, does not have physiological markings only behaviours (Anderson & McCormack, 2014: 131). Hence, there is always the risk that when taking a quick glimpse at the appendage next to you in order to alleviate your anxiety, you might inadvertently be defined as homosexual and deviant. This can also be attributed to a general anxiety about the amount of time one spends in those spaces.

To locate *Talking about Keith* (2013) in this ambiguous space does seem at first a strategy that evokes the metaphor rather than the metonym, for the feelings of anxiety that are experienced in the body are replaced by the generic linguistic term 'public toilet'. Yet the displacement of anxiety and shame actually occurred with those individuals who entered the space needing to use the toilet whilst I was performing in it. On a number of occasions when I was occupying the toilets people, both women and men, entered them and then immediately left. The most significant experience of this though occurred in the male toilets before the start of the second performance. During this time a middle-aged white male entered the space and quickly became agitated with my presence. As a result, he confronted me by stating that the toilets were a private space and that I would need ethical approval to continue with my work. By not 'participating' in the normative function of that space, the one that had been proven appropriate for me by my body, I had caused him anxiety by revealing the ambiguity associated with men and their engagement with public toilets. Therefore, it is through the anxiety experienced by other people with regards to definitions of private and public, that I metonymically reference my own experiences of anxiety in the performance experiments.

### **3.5.3: Destroying the Metaphor Through the Metonym**

In *Talking about Keith*, I also attempted to metonymically replace my visceral reactions, such as the gagging and retching I experienced after consuming my semen, and the heavy feeling that emerged in the pit of my stomach afterwards. To replicate these semiotic responses and to metonymically reference the patterns of my body I attempted to consume five 5-litre bottles of water and five bottles of salt, each weighing a kg. The pattern

was alternate, and therefore keg of salt was consumed, which was then followed by five litres of water, which was then followed again by the salt. As the performance progressed it became more and more difficult to complete the task, but importantly this difficulty was experienced in part because of the effect it had on my body. Difficulties started to emerge fairly soon into the performance where my body physically rejected the material as evidenced through my gagging and retching, and the bloating of my stomach. As I continued it also became progressively more difficult to lift the bottles of water above my head, and towards the end of the performance I had to keep stopping and starting the actions.

The point of this process was to try and generate a type of language that challenged the security of the symbolic. In relation to the way that Lacan (2001a) articulates the psychosexual development of the subject, the language developed would have to play within the in-between space of the body and phallus, or the objet petit a and the symbolic, which Kristeva (1984) refers to as the thetic space. The thetic space is ambiguous, for Kristeva articulates that it is a passageway that channels bodily codes into the symbolic from the semiotic, and in this respect, it 'marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms' (Kristeva, 1984: 45–48). With this in mind, the thetic space becomes indicative of the metaphorical structuring of the phallus (Lacan, 2001a) because the semiotic and thetic are repressed by the phallic bar. This is so that the symbolic representation of self can be fully articulated within the symbolic without feelings of fragmentation and incoherence (Kristeva, 1984: 58–59). The thetic therefore might be understood through patriarchy as a one-way system in which desires are filtered and safely constructed into language, as demonstrated briefly by

Brisley in *180 Hours – Work for Two People*, which was discussed in Chapter One.

However, Kristeva also notes that the thetic space is not a one-way system, it is highly unstable and can be easily ruptured by the semiotic so it can leak, and in turn pollute, the symbolic. In doing so, it exposes the potential dual movement between the two realms of the signifying system (Kristeva, 1984: 62). The rupturing of the thetic was achieved in *Talking about Keith* because the performance reproduced the semiotic signifiers, such as rhythms, annunciations and desires of the body. It was because the corporeal activities of retching and bloating were deliberately evoked as part of the artistic meaning making process that they were able to operate in the symbolic. Moreover, because these actions are also located as part of the body, they were also functioning in the realm of the semiotic and were able to cross back through the thetic space allowing the multiplicity and ambiguity associated with the semiotic to rub up against the symbolic (Kristeva, 1984: 79).

These bodily responses to the performance of the semiotic revealed in *Talking about Keith* (2013) a type of somatic language, which operated both within and outside of its symbolic system (Blocker, 2004: 30). By somatic language, I mean to imply a language of the body that does not attempt to rationalise our experience of the word, as we might argue verbal language does. Instead, a somatic language takes into account corporeal rhythms, drives, and feelings that afford the opportunity for us to understand our body. This is not to suggest that this is a language in opposition to Lacan's symbolic realm, for when our stomach grumbles we use formal language as a way of attempting to understand what is happening. In this respect, somatic language locates itself

within the in-between space of the semiotic and symbolic, which results in it rubbing up against signifying systems. The affect of this rubbing is that meaning becomes multiple because somatic language cannot be pinned down, when our stomach grumbles, for example, we might want food because we are hungry, or it could mean that we are about to be ill.

I see somatic language as being similar to Drew Leder's concept of *dys-appearance*. This is a useful concept to consider when exploring representations of masculinity because the 'dys' prefix refers to things that are bad, hard or ill (Leder, 1990: 84). At the same time though it also evokes the Latin *dis* and *dys*, which refers to being away, apart and asunder (Leder, 1990: 87). *Dys-appearance* points to the manifestation of those parts of our bodies that are usually ignored, and for the subject, it creates body self-consciousness. Considering Chapter One's emphasis on hypermasculinity, for the male subject *dys-appearance* offers the possibility to raise a corporeal awareness that exists past the externality of the body and into its passageways and insides.

In *Talking about Keith* somatic language became apparent through the gagging, retching and bloating within the performance space and whilst this was not initially meant to be part of the performance, its *dys-appearance* meant that it potentially became part of the work's signifying sign system. In doing so, somatic language possessed the potential to rupture the thetic bar that separates language from the body, and in doing so, it performatively produced the recessive body into the space (Blocker, 2004: 33). This is an important aspect in opening up masculine identity through the male body because culturally *dys-appearance* is undervalued or is seen as negative because, as argued by Leder, it is generally the young, the old, the ill, and



women that experience dramatic shifts in their body (Leder, 1990: 89). However, I am inclined to disagree with Leder here, for what *Talking about Keith* demonstrates is that as a male subject I am also able to experience my body as changing. Not just in relation to the pain that I experienced hours later after rubbing salt into my anus, but also in the way that my stomach felt heavy after consuming my own semen, and my throat was sore after retching.

In addition to this, *Talking about Keith* reminds me of all the other times that my body has changed as an adult. At 26, for example, a serious accident resulted in operations that now restrict my movement, furthermore since performing *Spitting Distance* my weight has changed, I have become heavier and slower. Yet there are even subtler changes that I am aware of: when I'm tired, for example, my stomach loosens, or when stressed I get a persistent cough; I have become more emotionally sensitive to the situations I find myself and other people in; the sensations that I find desirable have also changed, relocating pleasures to different parts of my body. As such, if phallic masculinity relies on the coherence of the male body *Talking about Keith* invites male corporeality to be fluid. This is meant physically, where the inside of the body flows to the outside (and back again), but it also refers to the fluidity of time (which is discussed further in Chapter Four) where the subject can experience explicit experiential shifts in their body.

## **Conclusion**

Somatic language in male body-based performance can safeguard the male body from becoming a phallic image, or being defined simply by words

(Blocker, 2004: 38). This has a significant impact for representations of male masculinity, for as Jane Blocker notes, the urge to render everything into a linguistic expression is a form of appropriation by a 'debased power' (Blocker, 2004: 31–32). With this in mind, the dys-appearance of somatic language, the gagging, choking and bloating of the body, creates the potential for a revolution in language because non-sensical sounds and images confront order, the logic of language, and in turn patriarchy (Kristeva, 1984: 80). By confusing the logic and order of linguistic expression through somatic language, a multiplicity of meaning is made possible because the already excessive codes of the body are made more ambiguous through their metonymical displacement. In *Talking about Keith* (2013), for example, semen is replaced by salt and water, the male toilets, coughing, gagging and bloating, and it is the distance between semen and its metonymical replacements that create figurative passageways for the 'other tongue of a thousand tongues speak [...]' (Cixous, 2003: 44).

Whilst I do feel that *Talking about Keith* made explicit how the male body might challenge masculine ideology, I am left wondering how successful this project was. I am thinking specifically in relation to the representation and cohesion of my masculine identity, and the destabilising potential of semen. What was significant about *Spitting Distance* was that the performances afforded me the opportunity to confront my own anxieties and have these emerge in the public space. However, the problem with *Talking about Keith* was that I experienced my own anxieties in the privacy of my own home, where no one could see me consume my semen. Furthermore, those same anxieties were also hidden through the performance because the moments of abjection that I experienced in the experiments were displaced through metonym. I

believe that this means that I had protected both myself and, inadvertently, the cultural sanctity of semen.

I am now left wondering to what extent as a male artist my identity remained cohesive as a result of that protection, and to what extent I really challenged patriarchal representations of seminal fluid. Conversely, I am also left wondering why the act of troubling masculinity had to result in feelings of anxiety and shame for the male artist; does this re-emphasise a binary between male corporeality and masculine identity where men will always be uncomfortable with their bodies? As I move into the next chapter of this thesis and make my final and third performance, *Generous Enema* (2016), I ask why do I need to experience anxiety in order to challenge my own identity? Why might exploring my body in performance raise anxiety in representations of masculinity, but also offer forward different experiences for me in relation to my understanding of self?

## Chapter 4: Generosity and Unknowing in Lived Experiences of Masculinity

A pause. A familiar 'click', and then I'm in darkness again, waiting. In these moments I am pulled away from the clean, clinical walls, and yellow doors, towards my body. Once facing inwards, my attention flickers between them and me, I wonder what I did wrong, or right, or what felt good, or what I worried about. I am aware that my anus, spreadeagled as my cheeks support the rest of my body, is open and cold. I touch it. I feel softer than I have done in the past. I like the way he touched my body, the way he made me laugh when he looked at me, and the way I squirmed when questioned about my intentions. In those dark moments, before the familiar 'click' is heard again, I change because I care, because they care. It's light again, I'm trying to control my breathing, and I smile.

The writing above comes from a longer piece of automatic writing I generated soon after the completion of *Generous Enema* (2016). I wrote it partly to capture my experience of sitting in a toilet cubicle with a variety of participants, and partly to take my mind off my upcoming viva. *Generous Enema* was the third and final piece of work associated with this doctoral project, taking the form of a one-to-one performance. It was installed for two days in adjoining cubicles of a gents toilet in the ground floor of The House Theatre at The University of Plymouth. The space it occupied was both public and private; a bathroom open to anyone using the building, but nevertheless safely behind the closed doors of two cubicles. The divide between those cubicles was removed so that two toilets could be located next to each other.

As I write about this piece here, I must reflect upon an error in one of the previous sentences. It wasn't really open to anyone using the building because it was located behind a door clearly marked for the use of men. The performance was installed in the late summer of 2016, a summer which had

seen the issue of access to toilets debated, discussed, and argued over across a range of social media platforms. Conversations around so-called 'bathroom bills' became the centre of a variety of think-pieces, campaigns, and demonstrations, with access to public toilets from transgendered individuals exercising a variety of states within the US, with one case eventually being taken to the Supreme Court in October 2016. Facebook and the like have made these local concerns a global talking point, so while I was not explicitly, or intentionally responding to these debates, over the course of the two days I was occupying a shared toilet stall with a variety of differently gendered participants, it was hard not to be aware that my unproblematic access to my chosen site was a further articulation of the unspoken privilege I experience.



*Figure 4.1: A participant Sitting Next to Me on the Adjacent Toilet.*

There were seven one-to-one performances in total, with each encounter lasting for a period of time determined by the participant. The shortest length of time anyone spent with me was approximately 15 minutes, the longest, closer to an hour. Each participant was either a member of staff or a postgraduate student from the University. The work was based on an autobiographical narrative that explored the pleasure I experienced in my youth of holding on to

my bowel movements. Unlike the other performances in this doctoral project where I internalised and negotiated moments of autobiographical exploration without recourse to the explicit discretion of the events that inspired it, this piece took the form of a direct-address, with the narrative I was working with being told to the participant as part of the performance.

On entering the cubicle, the participant was invited to sit on the adjacent toilet and asked if they would help give me an enema. It felt important to make clear at the outset of the exchange the potential terms of engagement, to resist any sense that the physical action was intended as a surprise. Layered over the top of this activity was the opportunity for a shared dialogue, which operated as a means for me to emphasise that the work was intended to offer us both the chance to negotiate the terrain of my body together. I also wanted to make clear through this section that if at any point the activity became too much then the participant could pause for a moment, decline to help or leave the space. This exchange provided an important opportunity for me as the artist to share control of the work with the participant. I wanted them to feel free to discuss how they felt, to ask me questions about the work, and to negotiate how the enema was administered. As such, what started to emerge during the performances was not only a negotiation of my body, but also a discussion about pleasure, emotions, and why I was embarking on this project. Significantly, it also allowed space for silence, a return to the non-verbal communication of the other two pieces that contribute to my understanding of generosity. The different aspects of this performance outlined above will be explored in more detail later.

At its heart, the purpose of this chapter is to consider why generosity as a concept in performance might offer an approach to challenging normative representations of masculinity. When I use the term generous, I mean that in order to challenge closed systems of masculine ideology I have attempted to expose and reflect upon those parts of my identity and my body that I would normally ignore or hide. I could have used terms such as 'sharing' or 'a coextensive exploration', but the terms generous and generosity, do something in relation to the male body, especially in relation to the manner in which the borders of my body were challenged, explored, and transgressed. Throughout the process of this research project, I have opened up my body and my identity to create spaces of reciprocity where others can make their meanings of me with me.

I articulate my understanding of generosity through the performance of *Generous Enema* (2016). In addition to opening up myself to interpretation, as a way of revealing the ambiguities associated with my identity, in performing *Generous Enema* I also came to understand generosity as being more than this. In each of the seven one-to-one performances that formed this work, generosity also became evident in the way that the participant and I negotiated the terrain of my body together; the way that time seemed to slow down; the way that multiple emotional responses to the abject body, other than fear, became present; and finally the way that, in some instances, the performance invited the participant and me to take care of each other. In this chapter, I argue that generosity challenges hegemonic ideology around masculinity because in allowing unsparing interpretations to manifest, to allow for different subjects to

experience male corporeality together, the clear-cut and definable boundaries of masculine identity may be blurred if not collapsed.

#### **4.1: Contextualising *Generous Enema***

The relationship between *Generous Enema* and the other two performances associated with this project is significant, for *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012) and *Talking about Keith* (2013) functioned as formative performances. The aims of both were to develop my understanding of how normative representations of masculinity might be challenged through resisting the re-inscription of those traits, behaviours, and characteristics into the performance space. In this respect, *Generous Enema* can be seen as a summative point in this doctoral project where new knowledge is generated, and with this in mind, I see it as sitting at the intersections of those previous works. Methodologically, *Generous Enema* follows on from *Spitting Distance* in that it draws upon the use of corporeal materiality in performance and its relationship to an autobiographical narrative. Similarly, it borrows the use of metonymic referencing from *Talking about Keith*, to allow the pushing of social boundaries to become manifest in the action of pushing at the boundaries of my body.

It is also worth noting at this point that whilst the documentation of *Generous Enema* (found in Appendix C) is included to meet the regulatory requirement of the University of Plymouth, it should not be seen as the site of knowledge generation. As I continue to argue in this chapter, the new knowledge generated for this project is located only within the experiences of the live performance, which I will attempt to unpack whilst recognising the



limitations of scholarly writing as I did in Chapter Three. Thus, the documentation of *Generous Enema* has been constructed in a way that allows gaps to emerge in the engagement with the material. It is hoped that these gaps go some way in replicating the intersubjective experience that the live performance afforded.

The aims of *Generous Enema* were to:

- Draw upon understandings generated in previous performances with the purpose of creating a piece of body-based performance that challenges normative representations of masculinity without re-inscribing those scripts into the performance space.
- To afford me a way to understand what generosity might be in the moment of performance.
- To explore what generosity feels like in relation to the coherence of my identity in the moment of performance.
- To articulate the dynamic relationship between participant and performer that emerges as a result of embracing generosity.

## **4.2: Defining Generosity Through Performance**

Within the context of this chapter, I articulate generosity and its presence in performance practice, as a type of gift in which an offer is made that is much more than expected (Walsh, 2016: 234). David Román (1997) and Jill Dolan (2013) argue that, to varying degrees, generosity is a process that takes into account contextual sensitivity to demonstrate how performance can reach people, affirm alternative mindsets, and question how we live in the world. In

this respect, generosity as performance criticism can be seen to borrow conceptually from feminist writings on performance. Both generous criticism and feminist writings highlight how performances can create spectatorial communities, which can offer commentary on mainstream identity politics, alongside the performance itself (Román, 1997: xxvii). The notion of generosity and generous criticism in relation to this PhD project affords an opportunity to mobilise a dialogue around representations of men and male identities. The aim is to challenge the normative assumptions associated with masculine identity, which I highlighted in Chapter One, and to provide an embodied platform that interrogates how men are expected to behave and what they are expected to do.

#### **4.2.1: Generosity as Social Advocacy**

The term generous has, at least from the 18th Century, referred to the solo artist, particularly in music, where the 'generosity of soul' was considered a feature of effective performance. In this context, it refers to the ability of the performer to open their self up for the purpose of demonstrating 'interior depth' (Walsh, 2016: 242–243). This particular discourse of generosity has its roots in the virtuosic, which is linked to connotations of skill, of an ability and technique that is honed over time, as well as a reliance upon charisma and excess, a quality of one's performance that cannot be pinned down (Osterweis, 2013: 57). However, as Bernstein notes in more recent decades it has also been attributed to connotations of cheapness and vulgarity in mainstream aesthetics, which are courted by the media press: 'The virtuosos provide the cultural reporter with subject matter, whilst the virtuoso's success is a function of journalistic advertising and good press coverage' (Bernstein, 1998: 11).

In her analysis of the dancer Desmond Richardson, Ariel Osterweis argues counter to Bernstein's (1998) position, that is, virtuosity, because of its connotations of excess, can reveal under-recognised heterogeneity that has in fact influenced high art (2013: 55). She goes on to note that '[i]n his extreme reaching and hyperflexible heights, Richardson's dancing beyond the grasp of the 'worded' incites utopic potentiality' (Osterweis, 2013: 61). By this, Osterweis means that Richardson skilfully operates within the in-between spaces of muscular and flexible, confident and vulnerable, the visible and invisible, and the masculine and feminine (Osterweis, 2013: 63). Importantly, virtuosity in its excess means that the viewer is unable to grasp everything that manifests on stage and because of this, the work dictates two viewing situations. The first is an attraction to the skill of the artist, and the second is an ontology, which asks the spectator to look at the artist in relation to their self (Osterweis, 2013: 69).

However, I argue that even Osterweis' interpretation of the virtuosic in excess of the linguistic has its limitations, despite her argument's conceptual similarities with Chapter Three. To suggest that generosity is about demonstrating the performer's depth of self, risks the artist becoming solipsistic and separate from the spectator. Furthermore, it becomes about a practice that only the artist can offer because of their extensive training in a particular discipline, and the spectator has to receive, rather than give, as a result of their inability to perform generously. Instead, and following Fintan Walsh, I suggest that generosity is both a practice, in that something extra is done or given, and is also a sense, a feeling or affect, that one experiences (Walsh, 2016: 235). In his chapter *On Generosity* Walsh explores the one-to-one work of Adrian Howells and describes generosity in the way that it is interactive, gentle, and

dialogic. Significantly, Walsh suggests that the generous performance is one that can be understood as anti-mastery 'in a way that it undercuts any accusation of generosity in its conventional artistic sense' (Walsh, 2016: 243). This shift away from the sharing of virtuosic skills, towards a more rhizomatic sharing, speaks to the significant development that generosity, especially in one-to-one performance practice, has afforded. Although, I also wish to develop further upon Walsh's point, by noting that generosity is also a process of reciprocity where the artist and participant can give and receive generously to each other.

While generosity in performance can be said to be about the construction of spectatorial communities, actions, and feelings (as mentioned above), those who practice generosity understand the limitations and counter-productivities of 'finger-wagging' (Murray, 2013: 215). Whilst generosity can be understood to be about a dialogue that offers commentary on mainstream identity politics, there is a 'lightness of touch' that can be associated with it as well. In reference to Lone Twin, for example, Simon Murray describes how their generosity is 'deeply inflected with politics that celebrates performance as embracing 'social practice'' (Murray, 2013: 215). He goes on to say that there is collaboration and comradeship between performers and spectators 'that gently and often humorously proposes an alternative set of quotidian relations to the atomised and commodified contracts of life under corporate and global capitalism' (Murray, 2013: 215).

Whilst not using the term generosity, that same lightness of touch is implied in Sara Gidden's and Simon Jones' discussion on their performance *Dream-work* (2010–2012). In this piece, they describe how they opened up

their performance walks in Singapore, and subsequently Nottingham, Wirksworth and Skegness, in order to let the residents of these areas tell 'something of their own place, from their points of view, from the inside' (Giddens & Jones, 2015: 314). With respect to both Lone Twin and Giddens and Jones, generosity becomes not about the artist or author of the work telling the spectators how to feel, react, act, or think. Instead, what is at the heart of generosity is a dialogue that allows communities of people the opportunity to be together and most importantly to discuss.

Up until now, the focus of this chapter has been on the conceptual engagement with generosity, however, it is worth pointing up at this stage that my own experiences of generosity through *Generous Enema* also came through my experiences of my body, something that arguably is demonstrable in the work of other body artists. In his analysis of Carolee Schneemann's work from the 1960s, for example, Kenneth White proposes that her art is 'built upon reciprocal generosity' (White, 2011: 27). In her earlier works such as *eye/body* (1963), Schneemann was interested in the way that the flesh in performance existed on bodies, but could not be separated from socio-political signification (Schneider, 1997: 33). In this respect, her aim was to explore the slippage between binary oppositions such as image-maker/image, subject/object, and masculine/feminine. In emphasising the slippage between oppositional binaries, Schneemann generously opened up her 'self' and her work for the purpose of providing discourse around the construction of identity politics.

However, to argue that Schneemann's performance could only be seen as generous because it opened up the possibility for discourse, does not take into account her 'lightness of touch'. As with the examples mentioned above,

Schneemann's *eye/body* reframed from dictating the privileging of a specific position, but the risk attributed to this act was great. Whilst many artist/scholars recognised *eye/body* as a feminist project, the primary criticism that she received from the male dominated art scene at the time was that the work could only be described as narcissistic exhibitionism. Furthermore, it was argued that she used her work to ride the art scene on the strength of her sexual appeal (Schneider, 1997 and Blocker, 2010). Of course, the irony of this was not lost on some feminist artists and scholars. Lucy Lippard, for example, noted that '(m)en can use beautiful, sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies, they are immediately accused of narcissism' (Lippard cited in Schneider, 1997: 35).

What I understand from Schneemann's work is that generosity is more than social engagement, as it is also about courage, a bravery to use yourself and your body to work against the repressive powers of normativity. In her analysis of AIDS-related performances and protests, Lauren DeLand reflects upon David Wojnarowicz's ability to do just this. She describes a 'terrible generosity' where he designated 'his dead body as a didactic for others to wield in resisting their own culturally imposed imperative to vanish' (DeLand, 2014: 40). In a similar vein, Dominic Johnson in his analysis of anomalous body practices, suggests that artists such as Samantha Sweeting and Martin O'Brien use their bodies to demonstrate the limited agency that culturally we have over our bodies in the West (Johnson, 2012b).

What the examples above seem to suggest, is that generosity is about giving articulations of one's own experiences while giving space to the articulations of others as well (Walton, 2010: 238). In this sense generosity is a

movement of information, a process that means people are able to offer interpretations of meaning to each other. It is a type of reciprocity, which enables the possibility of generating new meanings and new knowledges rather than a singularity. Generosity in performance challenges the notion of a fixed and singular language because, and in a similar vein to Hélène Cixous' point in *Laugh of Medusa* (Cixous et al., 2009: 881), it is a language that challenges the phallus through non-linearity and the avoidance of over-simplification by promoting confusion, ambiguity, and disorder. Following this, by inviting others to construct meaning with the artist, one might argue that generosity in performance suggests a form of social advocacy that comes into being by encouraging equality and social inclusion through the acknowledgement of multiplicity.

#### **4.2.2: Traces of Generosity**

Generosity is something that has grown with and through this PhD project, and because of this there are traces of it throughout *Spitting Distance* and *Talking about Keith*. Considering these performances, generosity might be conceptualised in this doctoral project through P. A Skantze's concept of the 'begging bowl' (2007: 144). This is because, while both performances presented images as signifiers, the works themselves possessed highly variable and unspecific signifieds. They were, as Derrida describes, examples of "false" verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganising it' (Derrida, 1981: 40). Instead of smoothing over the gaps that emerged in these performances, as the phallus in the symbolic may require us to do, *Spitting Distance* and *Talking about Keith* became 'begging bowls' in the ways that they deliberately

created holes in the work, which subsequently meant that audience members had the opportunity to fill those holes up with meaning.

The concept of the begging bowl is useful when considering how masculine identity is produced, at least through a psychoanalytic lens. If the phallus, which scholars such as Jones (1998) and Gallop (1990) argue as being possessed by the masculine subject, closes down meaning in the patriarchal economy, begging bowls might be indicative of orifices that allow meaning to be opened up. Thus, the newly opened orifices become lacunae, the filling of which we might allow new discourses to emerge about male bodies and hidden pleasures, which might further demystify common assumptions. Rather than the penis and ejaculate being seen as a productive discharge, for example, focus on the urethra might emphasise the penis as a site for waste and penetration, as demonstrated in Chapter Three through Robert Mapplethorpe's *Lou, N.Y.C* (1978).

### **4.3: Attending to Generosity Through Time**

However, what is of particular significance to this chapter about Skantze's definition of generosity is her use of time, for she suggests that generosity is about slowing down, and not thinking too fast, it is about spending time in that hole and paying attention to what is there (Skantze, 2007: 142). Through the performance of *Generous Enema*, I experienced different ways in which time manifests itself as gaps. Temporally, there was, of course, the representation of time as a marker depicted through the starting and finishing of individual performances and the performance event itself, but there was also



the experience of time slowing down and in some instances stopping. In addition to this, there was also a recognition that time can collapse in on itself and blur the distinctions between past, present and future selves.

#### **4.3.1: The Unilateral Experience of Time**

One of the most obvious ways that I spent time in *Generous Enema* was through the longevity of the performance event. The performance was structured in such a way that I invited participants into the work over two days. Each participant was invited on the hour, and as the performance would last, on average, between fifteen to twenty-five minutes, this left me with about forty minutes to prepare for the next participant. This preparation process was not only about attending to the space, but also about taking care of my body. The irony behind *Generous Enema* was that whilst enemas might be seen as having medicinal value<sup>23</sup>, I was concerned about the damage so many enemas might do to my body. In addition to limiting the number of enemas I received, I also consumed probiotic yoghurt to replace the bacteria that would have inevitably been lost through the performance. Because the process of setting and resetting between performances was so short, and because the taking care of my body was not too time-consuming, I found myself spending extended periods of time sitting on the toilet and reflecting.

This aspect of reflecting, which was not deliberately planned into the performance process, produced a curious element, which I had not been expecting. It afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my actions in the space with the previous participant and in turn adapt the performance for the next one. In the earlier works associated with this doctoral project, I identified moments

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<sup>23</sup> Although Martin O'Brien observes that whilst the enema might have medicinal properties, it has also been appropriated by masochistic practices (O'Brien, 2014: 60)

like this as being self-reflexive, yet the difference that I found between these and *Generous Enema* was that the latter provided a series of incubation spaces throughout the performance, rather than just one at the end. Philosopher and educationalist John Dewey describes the need for an incubation period because the continued pre-occupation with any topic strains the potential for problems to be solved (Dewey, 2008: 245). To offer time over to something, for example, one's behaviour and actions towards others, allows one to adapt and reconsider their being in the world around them.



Figure 4.2: *Periods of Incubation Between Iterations.*

My understanding of *Generous Enema* through incubation meant that I came to recognise that the participants needed some preparation in the moment of performance, a type of training, in order to participate in the work. By training, I am not suggesting a process of disciplining participants with the view of allowing their training to serve the performance. It was not about creating participants that are 'manipulated, shaped, trained, [and] which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces' (Foucault, 1977: 136). Instead, it was necessary that an environment was created where contemplation was allowed, a training where the participants find themselves,

through the engagement with another's body, thrown back to their own (Whalley & Miller, 2013: 106). It was about training that gave over space to the participants to dwell within their own flesh and mine.

My production of space as a mode of training happened in subtle ways over the longevity of the performance event. Instead of offering the rubber gloves to the participant as soon as they entered, as I did in the first performance, I waited and allowed the participant to fully 'arrive' in the space next to me. Before placing their hand on my stomach so they could feel my breathing, I first asked to hold their hand. I asked them how they felt and explained to them my feelings at that moment. I constantly asked if they wanted to continue with the work, I explained carefully before the enema what I was going to do and asked if they would like to help. I offered multiple exit points throughout the work, as well as suggesting alternative approaches to my requests. Not only did I hope this would allow individual participants to become more comfortable in the work, and with me, but through these incubation periods and my attendance to me in response to them, I learnt how to be more generous from the participants that I had engaged with.

Inevitably, the longevity of the event combined with the incubation periods and its form as a one-to-one performance meant that the first iteration of *Generous Enema* was significantly different to the last. Setting aside the recognition that in all live performance practice, the repetition of a work will never allow the exact same performance to exist more than once (see Phelan, 1993), *Generous Enema* changed not only as a result of its repetition, but the 'incubation' period allowed for deliberate adaption after each engagement. In response to my experiences of encountering different individuals in each

iteration, the work was adapted as a result of my own developing understanding of generosity, allowing me space to (hopefully) become more attentive to the needs of each participant.

#### **4.3.2: Collapsing Time**

However, while the gaps in time provided me with useful moments of reflexivity, and the duration made explicit *Generous Enema* as a fluid performance, the unidirectionality of time was not left unchallenged. Through the performance, I also experienced moments where time slowed down for me. This happened on a number of occasions, but most explicitly in those moments when my body experienced stress, for example when trying to accommodate the two litres of enema water, or when the enema tip was placed into and pulled out of my anus. Those moments of stress also emerged for me when I became aware of the tensions that started to exist between myself and other participants, even if they were not made explicit by the participant themselves. Here I am thinking of the questions that were asked, but which I could not answer, or the performances where individuals found it difficult to engage with the work, but still remained in the space with me.

Whilst coming from the position of the spectator, Tim Etchells refers to the slowing down of time as images of stasis when reflecting upon his experiences of watching Ron Athey perform (Etchells, 2013: 230). In allowing moments to hold in his work, Athey seems to take time in unfolding his body, where images using penetration, needles, syringes, and violent eroticism are allowed to form (Stephanou, 2011: 211). I have experienced these moments of stasis myself when watching his work. In *Solar Anus* (1998) for example, a seemingly never-ending string of pearls emerge from his anus, and in *Self*

*Obliteration I* (2007) I watched terrifying amounts of blood cover his body and sheets of glass. I recognise here that these are of course subjective positions, but that's the point of generosity for it allows time for these positions to form.

In 2014, at *SPILL Festival*, Ipswich, UK, the experience of stasis in Athey's *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* was made most explicit to me out of all of his performances that I have engaged with. Furthermore, it's necessary to state here that this was also the first time that I had seen Athey's body-based work live. As I turned up to the Town Hall where the work was being performed forty-five minutes earlier than the advertised start, I found myself stood next to a red rope that restricted my access to the performance space. As I waited for the time to pass, I became more and more agitated about what I was about to see and how it would reify the masculinist discourse that I had associated with this work, and which I have written about in Chapter One. I also became irritated by the slow trickle of people that had started occupying the close space around me, who seemed excited and supportive with what they were about to see.

I was the first person to make it up the stairs and enter the vacuous space where, at one end of the room, Athey laid on a bed structure made out of steel tubing. From his face, taut wires extended out and attached to the end of the bed, and from underneath the structure, a baseball bat extended out from his anus. Two attendants dressed in cloth that hung from their waists, and holding a wooden bowl that seemed to contain a white viscous substance, invited me up onto the stage with Athey. I declined this offer and instead made my way to the other end of the space where some raked steel deck was placed for spectators to stand on. It was from here that I watched those people who

came in after me patiently queue so they could make their way up onto the stage, to spend time with Athey, to rub the thick substance in the wooden bowls onto his body.

In making the decision to decline the offer, I was afforded the opportunity to spend time with the image of Athey, and the image of the participants being with him in the performance space. In doing so, I began to feel stressed and anxious about the different, and sometimes conflicting, emotional responses that I was experiencing outside of the assumptions I had made in the foyer. I felt a strong sense of envy as I watched what I believed to be acts of kindness and caregiving from both Athey and his participants, at the same time as I felt concern for his body, and wishing that those participants would hurry up. I was affected by the way in which some participants didn't rub but simply touched his body, and I felt tense as I imagined what it would be like to experience the constant and repetitive action of others engaging with me like they did with Athey. Mostly, I felt angry with myself for assuming Athey's intentions, and I began to wonder what my assumptions about his work said about me and my relationship to other bodies. It was at this point where I realised, as I noted in Chapter Three, that the object does not have to be feared or shameful.

It is as a result of experiencing time pausing that Athey's performances bring into being a cultural neurosis, and I wonder if this in part describes my feelings of stress in experiencing his work, as well as the stress I experienced in *Generous Enema*. As noted in the first chapter, Athey's performances have the ability to make the witness feel a variety of conflicting emotions (Jones, 2013: 152). As is the case with the work of David Wojnarowicz (see above), it is through this confusion and anxiety, that Athey uses his body to resist normative

regimes of power. I argue that the prolonged periods of time that Athey resides in these abject images caused me, as a spectator, to question my assumptions about my body in relation to others, and in turn my identity. If this is the case, Athey's 'generosity invites the participant to engage in an expanded horizon of intimate relations' (Johnson, 2012a: 99).

Stasis emerged for me in *Generous Enema* in the moments where participants helped me to insert the enema tube, or where I spent time trying to accommodate the two litres of water. There were also moments that in hindsight should have felt temporally shorter than they did, like the insertion of the participant's finger into my rectum, or the way that some participants questioned my intentions during the work. Considering this, stasis also allowed me, as the performer, to experience my own 'expanded horizon of intimate relations' as it allowed questions to emerge for me about what it means to allow someone else to insert their finger into my rectum. It allowed me to attend to those emotions that surfaced, to admit to the contradictory feelings of insecurity, enjoyment, and pleasure, a term that I will return to later. As such, unlike Athey's work, those images of stasis in *Generous Enema* are moments where I take the time to unfold my body, not just for the participants of the work, but also for myself. They act as a way for me to question my own relationship to a normative masculine identity.

Putting stasis aside, I also ascertain that both Athey's and my use of time is more complex than simply slowing it down and it involves more than just the body. Instead, and as Roberta Mock notes, Athey's performances have the ability to destabilise time (Mock, 2010: 195). Focussing specifically on *Solar Anus*, she observes that central to that performance is Athey's tattooed anus

and that tattooing, which was fundamental to the specific moment of performance, was done six years prior. However, the video of that moment was also played during the performance, thus Mock argues that '[t]he instance of tattooing is collapsed into the instance of ritual we later experienced' (Mock, 2010: 195). This collapsing of a past self into the present is also apparent in other artists' work. Martin O'Brien, for example, as a sufferer of cystic fibrosis uses the medicinal practices and experiences associated with his illness as strategies for making performance.

By collapsing his past self into his present one, O'Brien confuses the potentially normative and singular reading of his identity as a cystic fibrosis sufferer. He notes that '[f]rom an anatomical perspective illness is readable but within the performance of illness more is at stake: identity; subjectivity; and bodily control' (O'Brien, 2012: 147). He sees these aspects as being at stake, because those with a chronic illness, or disability more generally, are seen through the Foucauldian 'medical gaze' as objects to be cured or at least relieved of the symptoms that society sees as debilitating. Michel Foucault's work in the area of medicine highlights that the medical gaze is about administering lives (Foucault, 1978: 139). It negotiates the intersections between government control and self-discipline in which one is required to discipline their self in order to stay within the social norms (O'Brien, 2014: 58). By including regimes of hardship that have been appropriated or modified from medical techniques in his work, O'Brien endures these practices as a way of discussing his cystic fibrosis without denying the sensuous materiality of his body (O'Brien, 2014: 59). In one way, he achieves this through resisting illness



by attributing the experience of pain with the potential of it being positive and pleasurable (O'Brien, 2012: 151).

There is a practical distinction that needs to be made between Athey's collapsing of time compared to that of O'Brien's. Whereas Athey's approach in *Solar Anus* focuses on the very visual aspect of two selves, a recorded past and a live presence in the same space, O'Brien's is more abstract. The different techniques and experiences are central to particular moments in his performances, yet they do not operate in the instance of performance as medicinal practices. Instead, it is his embodied knowledge of them and the effect they have on his body, as well as his ability to apply those techniques in an alternative context, that allows them to appear in the performance space. While his actions and the objects in the space may remind the audience of medicinal practices, in the moment of performance, they are not (just) these. O'Brien's work collapses the medicinal practices of his past and future and locates them in the performance space of the present, a space where he demonstrates his self as a suffering body through both circumstance and choice.

What became apparent to me though in the first two performances of this doctoral project is that time, when only considered as a linear construct, allowed for the present moment in performance with the abject to mask my abject past. My experience with the abject was always only performed as temporary, in the moment of performance, which made explicit the possibility for me to return to the safety and privilege of normative masculinity after the event. This act of masking was made evident further in Chapter Two, where I note that the abject made me feel so uncomfortable and repulsed, that I chose not to continue with the second performance of *Spitting Distance*. In Chapter Three, it was

evidenced through my reluctance to use the materiality of my body in the performance of *Talking about Keith*, despite it causing such a visceral affect on me in the performance experiments.

To rectify this problem, in *Generous Enema* I told my autobiographical story one that outlined the pleasures I have experienced, and continue to experience when withholding my bowel movements. Moreover, the narrative also discussed the moment as a teenager where after a night out during which I refused to go to the toilet, I shit myself on the doorstep of my parent's home. What is important here as a strategy is that the affective force, the actual act of having an enema and the activities that allow that to happen, is abject as a result of both the bodily fluid and the crossing over of bodily boundaries. The purpose of the autobiographical narrative, when spoken at the same time as the affective force of the memory, as discussed in Chapter Two, is to make evident how my identity might also be considered abject in the past, in the moment, and also potentially in the future. Therefore, what is important about the collapsing of time in *Generous Enema*, and the works of Athey and O'Brien, is that there is a generous collapse of our past abject bodies into our present ones, which in turn, suggests the potential for our future ones to exist.

#### **4.4: Generous Unknowability**

I think it is important that I point up a contradiction that is starting to emerge in this thesis, because in the second chapter I argued that the speaking of autobiographical narratives as a strategy for making was problematic for me as a white, middle-class, heterosexual male. The problem I identified was that an autobiographical narrative that promotes my voice might also re-inscribe

normative masculine subjectivity, where I become the authoritative "I". In Chapter One, I also read this in Ron Athey's work (despite the queer readings associated with it), but I also noted that through his description and re-enactment of the abject self he also allowed his identity to be presented as coherent. Nevertheless, I now propose that the collapsing of time in on itself through the explicit references to the abject self is not about getting one's bearings through the recognition of what is "I" through "not-I". Instead, establishing the abject self is about locating one's self away from the everyday mundane violence of normativity. In this respect, I also propose that this is less to do with performing muscular masculinity and more to do with the process of becoming deject.

#### **4.4.1: Generosity, Autobiography and Pleasure**

The collapsing of time in autobiographical performances is not an unusual concept, for in her analysis of Tim Miller's performance *Glory Box* (2001) Dee Heddon explains that Miller performs events from the past, present and predicts the future (Heddon, 2003: 249). This strategy is used to create a dissonance between the past, present and future selves. She also goes on to note that dissonance is also revealed through the multiple people he performs in his narratives, the development of duologues with himself, and a process of enacting different events (Heddon, 2003: 248). These approaches to making, when combined with the performance of his previous selves, create multiple 'Tim Millers' and thus the audience can never completely be sure who the 'real' Tim Miller is (Heddon, 2003: 249). The point here is that autobiographical performance work is designed to promote the theatricality, or social construction, of identity and self so that normative assumptions about the innate

characteristics of marginalised identities can be challenged. Considering this, it would seem that autobiography in theatre and performance is not necessarily about digging deeper to reveal a true or foundational self (Heddon, 2003: 243).

Similarly, the purpose of *Generous Enema* was not about unearthing an ontological identity, for, as Chapters Two and Three note, part of my strategy in the previous performances has been about exposing multiplicity. Yet, at the same time *Generous Enema*, and the other two performances that preceded it step away from the theatricality of identity politics in autobiographical performance. Unlike Miller, who vocalises the assumptions that normative Western thought makes about his homosexual identity, and his struggles with those assumptions (Heddon, 2003: 244), my approach to autobiography cannot deal with struggle in this way. Instead, and following Stephen Heath's analysis of men operating within feminism, my job is about listening and changing (Heath, 2002: 1). It is not that I should not speak up about those inequalities, but I also need to look at myself and my relationship to privilege, as it is here where I need to experience struggle (Jardine, 2002: 59).

The movement away from the autobiographical strategies employed by Tim Miller and other marginalised identities, meant that it was important for me in *Generous Enema* to unearth and unveil myself. The purpose of this was so that I could brush away the multiple and complex significations that patriarchy requires me to perform in order to reveal moments in my life that work against normative masculinity. 'Brushing away', 'unearthing' and 'digging deep' are metaphors that usefully evoke archaeology; I am not searching for wholeness, but fragments of my past and present experiences that I would rather keep quiet about. While I have chosen in all three performances to do this in a way

that exposes the abject body, those archaeological metaphors are not limited to this. These hidden experiences can also refer to moments of emotional vulnerability or uncertainty concerning my identity. This whole research project, for example, swings around an important life-turning moment and represents a need to redefine my understanding of self.

The problem with this interpretation of autobiography is that it reinscribes this type of work as solipsistic and self-centred, yet I am not entirely convinced that it is inward focussed. As I noted in Chapter One, 'self-centredness – in the formal sense of unapologetically placing [oneself] at the centre of artistic production – also 'bleeds' out into concrete possibilities for affective relations: sympathy, identifications, generosity, denial [...] (Johnson, 2012a: 97). In this sense *Generous Enema* can be seen as a type of life writing, an approach which Natalie LeBlanc, Sara Davidson, Jee Ryu and Rita Irwin claim is about engaging with one's own 'becoming' whilst being in a community of enquiry, and allowing those people in that community to weave through each other (Leblanc et al., 2015: 256). The practice of making work in this context is two-fold. It is about exploring my experiences in unstructured and unexpected ways and also about how others may find part of themselves in my work, or even in me (Leblanc et al., 2015: 257).

Speaking of my abject autobiographical experiences is about marking my own abject identity not only in the present moment, but in the past, and with the potential for it to exist in the future. In doing so, its incoherence is not only made explicit through the emergence of multiple selves, the selves of the past, the present, the future, together with the selves that become as a result of the interpretations of the participants. The incoherence of my identity also emerges

as a result of my continued, but hidden and now revealed, engagement with my abject body. To vocalise these moments is to take responsibility for those fragments of my identity, to reflect on them, and to embrace them. In doing so, my aim is to take responsibility for them as part of my masculine identity, rather than partake in a type of 'finger-wagging' designed to lecture others about the pervasiveness of patriarchy. The latter is dangerous because it deflects focus away from the masculine subject and their relationship to privilege, as well as centring their self as a site for knowledge; I propose that this is demonstrable in both Vito Acconci's performance of *Conversions III* (1971), which was discussed in Chapter Two, and the concept of muscular masculinity, which I outlined in Chapter One.

#### **4.4.2: Generosity and Becoming Deject**

Reconsidering my relationship to the abject autobiographical experience is important at this stage because it allows me to return to my reading of Athey that I outlined in Chapter One. Rather than performing muscular masculinity, I now propose that Athey challenges normative representations of masculinity because he moves past the abject as a boundary for our identity, and instead sees it as a space to reside in. He achieves this by making explicit the abject qualities and experiences that have informed his identity, and as such it is his identity that becomes abject. 'The one by whom the abject exists is [...] a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing' (Kristeva, 1982: 8). The deject, according to Kristeva never stops demarcating his universe because of his exclusion. It is as a result of generously becoming deject, not being afraid of his exclusion, that Athey can commit his body to

challenging conventions, emotional safeguarding and complacency by never resolving the abject. By being deject, it is Athey's spectators and not Athey himself that define the moral limits (Mock, 2010: 182).

Yet Kristeva makes an important observation about the deject that is they are 'not without laughter since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection' (Kristeva, 1982: 8). So whilst the reactions to the abject can be visceral and emotional, the role of the abject in challenging normative representations of masculinity does not have to only exist through experiences of shame and anxiety. To enforce this position reinforces the abhorrence of male corporeality and, once again, sees it as being not normal in relation to normativity. The abject that is something other than shame and anxiety is supported by Catherine Gund who states that Athey survives his performances by cultivating extreme responses, of which laughter is one, to extreme situations (Gund, 2013: 54). Laughing in the abject has the function of displacing it, which is not the same type of displacement that was identified in Chapter Three concerning bodily fluid. To displace the abject is to reveal it as part of the self, to see it as destabilising not because masculinity is clean and proper, but because the abject is ambiguous and unknowable.

The purpose of *Generous Enema* was to reside in the abject for extended periods of time. I recognise this to mean not only in relation to the different lengths of time individuals participated in the performance, but also over the space of two days that event took place, and also over my lifetime. In doing so, I experienced a range of feelings and emotions, sometimes as a result of whom I was with, but also with regards to how my body reacted to different situations. In all of the performances, the narrative that I constructed

around the withholding of my faeces was based on the pleasure of releasing at the last minute. The enema kit provided me with a similar opportunity, for after administering the enema, I would hold on to the water whilst I recounted the last part of my story. My pleasure would come through the feeling of water being released from my anus, having my bowels empty, hearing 'my' water hit the toilet water, and feeling that water hit my skin.



*Figure 4.3: Experiencing Pleasure Whilst Being with Others.*

Yet pleasure emerged through a variety of different contexts and not just through corporeal pleasure. In negotiating the boundaries of my body together I found myself taking pleasure in taking care of the participants, but there were also moments where the participants seemed to take care of me. I experienced this when people asked me if I was okay, but also in the moments where individuals responded to my body. After asking one participant how they felt, they responded with the same question to which I replied: "I'm nervous". I am not in a position to state for certain that their responses to my feelings were clear, but when that participant started to breathe more heavily and slower, I started to follow their lead. As a result of their attendance to my body, I became



calmer and more relaxed and following this, I experienced a pleasure associated with just being with people and allowing 'things' to happen that I may not have planned for.

What I am not saying though is that anxiety and shame did not surface at all throughout *Generous Enema*. When a participant started to quiz me about why I was doing this performance, and why my experiences needed to be public, for example, I became nervous and agitated. My body physically started to close up, and I found it difficult to relax into the process of giving myself an enema. In rehearsals, the two-litre can that stored the water usually emptied by about three quarters, in this particular performance I was already struggling by the time it reached the halfway point. In another instance, a participant did not want to lubricate my rectum, which in practice allowed the enema tip to navigate into my body safely. Instead, they offered to wipe Vaseline onto my anus, and then for me to massage it in afterwards. While I was bent over, and the participant was applying the Vaseline, images of my mother wiping my bum with Sudocrem flashed into my mind. At this moment, the collapse of the participant's actions with my mother's some thirty years previous started to make me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. What I found striking about these moments, was that I felt less vulnerable the more the participants invested in my body.

To linger in the spaces of one's abject body, to become deject, is not always about feeling ashamed and anxious, for to only feel these is a process of constructing a coherent self, which rejects the ambiguity of the body. Similarly, to say that once one is in the margins and boundaries of their identity they are incoherent is to ignore how one can recognise aspects of who they are.

To be deject is about allowing for a full experience of the body, to allow for contradictions to emerge, and to embrace these, and to articulate them. Therefore, the deject might be thought of as being *a-coherent*, that is neither coherent nor incoherent, or more appropriately to be deject is not to be concerned with either. Instead, the deject is a process of generosity where the body is opened up for others to engage with, it is about listening and interpretation, and about attending to the complexities and ambiguities beyond ordinary and habitual understandings (Heddon, 2016: 32). Listening refers to being caring, being attentive, and being curious with one another (Heddon, 2016: 39).

Considering this, I see generosity in performance as a type of service to be performed as it provides opportunities for the participants and performer to experience different corporealities. In doing so, it unsettles presumed boundaries of our bodies and our identities, as well as challenging established hierarchies (Walsh, 2016: 243–244). My body is used in this service metonymically as a reference to the boundaries and structures that construct social definitions of who we are. Kristeva notes that '[d]efilement is what is jettisoned from the "symbolic system"' (1982: 66). By negotiating my corporeality, by delving into the unknown, the participant and I can explore situations that we might never have imagined ourselves in before. The experiencing of these situations can work to challenge both who we think we are, and how patriarchy requires us to act, through the emergence of bodily feelings and emotions. The potential of this was highlighted to me in *Generous Enema* through a moment of revelation when a participant stated that they had

never penetrated another man's anus before. Similarly, up until that moment, I had never been penetrated by another man.

#### **4.4.3: The Paradox of Making Explicit the Unknowable**

This thesis proposes that the deject in performance allows for a generous 'unknowability' through the opening up of the body. That is the abject is used to enlighten or to find out what is unknown, which is articulated to each other through a process of listening and discourse. The importance of a performer showing the abject to an audience is based on the possibility that we might embrace that ambiguity and unknowability together. However, there is a paradox at play here, because in order for something to be unknowable it can never be made explicit, as once this happens it becomes knowable. This is also the paradox that this thesis has been battling with, for what destabilises normative representations of masculinity, at least through a Lacanian and Kristevan perspective, is that which is left outside of the symbolic order. At the same time, one has to be aware that in the very act of trying to mark those rejected elements within the symbolic order, there is a risk that they become closed down.

Through her analysis of female body art, Rebecca Schneider in *The Explicit Body in Performance* notes that the making explicit of the unknowable body, at least within the context of her book, is better understood as a process of explication rather than fraught with the prurient contexts normally associated with the term. With its origins in Latin, rather than meaning to define, explicate is a process of unfolding and Schneider uses it to refer to the peeling back of signification that surrounds the body (Schneider, 1997: 2). Her argument is that female body artists since the 1960s have unfolded their bodies in performance

to explicate it in relation to social construction. Therefore, the explicit body in performance replays the historical drama of gender and/or race across the body; it critically engages different ways of seeing; it challenges the body's representations with desire, commodity and capitalism; it 'talks back' to modernist values of transgression (Schneider, 1997: 3).

By unfolding the body, by making it explicit the performers also make apparent how bodies are stages for social theatrics, and in doing so, those theatrics are systematically re-considered and re-scripted (Schneider, 1997: 6). Re-consideration and re-scripting occur because Schneider argues that what appears in the explicit body is an excess that disrupts normative vision. It is a refusal to disappear (Schneider, 1997: 6). The concepts of excess and its disruption to normative vision, and a refusal to disappear are direct references to Peggy Phelan's book *Unmarked* (1993). In this text, Phelan presents the concept that visibility is a trap as it promotes colonial, sexist, classist and homophobic discourse (Phelan, 1993: 6). The reason for this is because in patriarchal culture reading the externality of the body is a way of regulating identity (Phelan, 1993: 10). Thus Phelan's goal in *Unmarked* is to reveal what is not present in order to understand one's self.

Phelan (1993) notes though, and this is important in attending to the problems outlined in my thesis, that inevitably the invisible that is seen in performance and what is subsequently written about is by virtue marked visible. However, she does go on to say that 'because what I do not see and do not write about is much more vast than what I do, it is impossible to 'ruin' the unmarked' (Phelan, 1993: 27). Phelan's project is about challenging the visible by opening up the blind spots (Phelan, 1993: 3), and as choreographers Simon

Ellis and Colin Poole note , '[h]umans live, relate, write and converse with blind spots and we need something, or someone else in order to reveal those blind spots [to us]' (Ellis & Poole, 2014: 210).

When my unknowable body is made explicit through the performances associated with this PhD project, I am not suggesting that it becomes linguistically defined. To do so would be to engage with what Lacan calls *usufruct*, which means to enjoy something without diminishing it, and he sees this as being indicative of the symbolic order, which divides up, distributes and reattributes everything (Lacan, 1998: 3). I propose that we might see this dividing up of excess in the works that I have defined as muscular masculinity in Chapter One. Instead, there is a *jouissance* associated with the unknowable body, a painful recognition that there is no way to fully capture it in the symbolic order, despite the subject experiencing it. These blind spots help to collapse linguistic meaning because they emerge from an entangled relation between bodies and subjects. The moment those blind spots are made visible to me through my body, or by someone else, is the moment they disappear again refusing to be fully manifest through the limitations of my writing.

These blind spots are the moments when my body speaks by bursting through the thetic bar, as described in Chapter Three. Or they are the feelings that I get when I interact with someone else, and I am not sure how to interpret their intentions. They are also those moments that I have not meant to reveal to you, that you have interpreted through the cracks, gaps and punctum of my writing, or through the small (possibly accidental) movements of my body that you have noticed, and subsequently read, in the documentation of my performances. As such, what making explicit the unknowable body offers us in

performance is knowledge through the interpretation of experience. Furthermore, it provides both participants and performer with the knowledge of the presence of the unknowable as existing outside of the symbolic system. In relation to this thesis, and to borrow from Phelan (1993), the knowledge emerges not just from what I write about or what I feel, but also in what I do not write and the feelings that I cannot articulate, but which somehow find their way to you.

## **Conclusion**

I propose, and with reference to masculinity, that generosity might be a way of removing the pain of being subjected to masculine normative subjectivity. By explicating normative masculine identity, by pulling me away from the behaviours, characteristics and traits of normative masculinity, generosity enabled the collapsing of meaning to occur. In *Generous Enema*, meaning was made through a process of hearing but also through listening and experiencing my relationship with others. In locating me alongside other people, I was able to experience my own unknowability with them, and in turn, I was able to learn about myself outside of a symbolic system of representation. I argue here that generosity in performance is more than a practice, in the same way that it is more than something to be performed. Instead, it is an environment that allows for generosity to manifest in all those who reside in it.

## **Conclusion: Needing Generosity, Struggle and Change**

Between the pages of this thesis, there has been a struggle. There has been a struggle in the very literal sense of the term. I have struggled with my fingers as they fought their way back to the delete button on my keyboard, refusing to finish off the words that reveal too much about me. I have also struggled, because, in overcoming my desire to delete, the result has been no more fruitful in revealing a 'true me' than it would have been to submit to the backspace. As my endless redrafting of chapters has revealed, what I write about 'me' is not always true. Admittedly, the term 'truth' may need some reviewing, perhaps it is a little misleading. Maybe, it would be more appropriate to suggest that within the words that I write there contains what Jacques Lacan refers to as *méconnaissance* (Lacan, 2001: 6). That is, within those words I think I see my reflection, but those words are not me, or at least not completely me. This feeling of alienation from what I see as being myself also manifests itself as something slightly different. At the same time as saying "those words are not completely me", I also cannot quite believe that the decision to invite the gentle prodding of my anus, or allowing people the space to gob on my chest is 'me' either.

On top of this, there are also the 'yets', the 'maybes', the 'not-quotes', the 'howevers', and the 'buts' to attend to. The contradictions that litter the opening paragraph of this conclusion, that haunt the chapters of this thesis. All of these additions have caused me to struggle. I have sat at my desk on many occasions slowly typing the next word in a desperate search for something that feels right,

something that makes my journey over the last six years feel more concrete. Even as I type the final few words of this thesis, I am not wholly convinced that that feeling of 'rightness' has every really appeared, even though I have read and reread these words in order to convince myself otherwise. The problem is that these words keep moving, and in their shifting, I am constantly forced to demarcate myself. Actually, the problem is not just that the words keep shifting, the problem is that it is me that keeps shifting those words, and when it is not me it's you, and because of this, I can't quite make sense of myself.

And yet, despite all of this I have come to the understanding that to struggle is useful. I have come to feel an excitement in the physical and emotional struggle of performing my leaky male body. I have found myself searching for, and embracing, examples of my abject self, which may have been buried deep, repressed through my complicity with articulations of hegemonic masculinity for many years. This doctoral project started with the purpose of finding alternative ways of challenging patriarchal representations of masculinity in male body art. Whilst it has still not ended, what I have come to believe is that one way in which a challenge can be achieved is through the recognition of struggle. Not a generic struggle demonstrated through the performance of a generic masculinity; instead I refer to my struggle with my identity, with my body, and with the ambiguity that surrounds both.

## **Summary of Argument**

I have come to believe that struggle is important here, and more so in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, because as I start to write the final few pages of this thesis I am also reflecting on how in the last six months masculinity and certainty seem to



have come hand in hand for the West. In June 2016, there was certainty in the men whose pale white faces came to represent 'Brexit', and who, in turn, claimed to represent the voice of the United Kingdom. A week before the referendum, Thomas Mair, also pale, but not of the same 'stock' as those pale faces that came before him, was certain that 'Britain First' meant the death of Labour politician Jo Cox. Roughly around the same time as this tragic event, social media sites became emblazoned with the certainty of Donald Trump, now President of the United States of America, who, whilst being filmed in 2005, confidently stated that he could do anything, including "grab women by their pussy". In response to the Women's Marches of 2017, that protested during Trump's inauguration against his use of hate speech, Daily Mail Online Editor, Piers Morgan, tweeted the following: "I'm planning a 'Men's March to protest at the creeping global emasculation of my gender by rabid feminists. Who's with me?"

Of course, certainty is also *méconnaissance*, for whilst Trump presents an arrogant and self-assured persona, this is challenged by his need to ensure that his audience recognises his popularity, despite the official statistics that suggest he is the least popular of all 44 American Presidents. Similarly, whilst Morgan attempts to belittle the Women's Marches as frivolous and petty, he also exposes his own fear of emasculation. In presenting a hegemonic masculine persona, both Trump and Morgan demonstrate their inability to achieve those ideals. In Chapter One of this thesis I identified that for the last fifty years, some male body artists had deliberately used similar strategies in performance. However, rather than reasserting hegemony, as Trump and Morgan did, those artists attempted to challenge it by exposing its incoherence.

The problem with this strategy is that to deconstruct normative representations of masculinity in the performance space, male artists must re-inscribe those same gendered texts that they are trying to challenge. When I consider the works of Robert Morris, Vito Acconci, Gilbert and George, and Stuart Brisley in this context, their distinction from the gender politics of Trump and Morgan become blurred, even though I am sure that this is not their intention.

## **Masks**

What I understand to be the crux of the problem with performing normativity, is that the artists who do perform it are not being generous in revealing themselves, and so there is no recognition on their part that their masculine identities might challenge normalcy. Instead of looking for ways in which their identities deviate from patriarchal definitions of men by focusing on corporeal desire, desire generally, and their leaky body, these artists create normative masks that keep these aspects buried. Even when the abject body becomes foregrounded, barriers are put up by male artists so as to displace shame and anxiety onto a fictional and generic male identity. In Chapter One I argued that Stuart Brisley and Gilbert and George achieve this with the performance of ironic and parodic knowingness. With these performances what becomes difficult to move beyond is the sense of power and authority these artists, albeit unintentionally, portray. When considering those works I understand their intention, but these performances almost feel like a lecture, it is as if those artists already know something that the rest of us do not, that whilst they have 'transcended' normative masculinity, leaving the rest of us behind,

their job is to demonstrate everyone else's complicity to hegemony by performing what the rest of us are, and what they are not.

Whilst I read these artists as practising *méconnaissance*, I am also, albeit reluctantly, inclined to admit that these 'transcended' artists are in part right. I don't mean to suggest that they are challenging hegemony without encountering problems, rather, that I am now aware that I have been complicit with hegemony, which I need to attend to. Complicity occurs because patriarchy is so deeply embedded in my cultural landscape, and because of this I am not always aware when I am re-inscribing its definitions of normative masculine identity. I do struggle with this observation, I am embarrassed to be admitting to my complicity, but it is important that I do, for, as I noted in Chapter Three, when discussing the abject I am constructed from what I accept and what I reject. To highlight both means that I can identify areas for change, as well as demonstrate any deviation from normativity.

The deconstructive strategy of performing normativity does offer the potential for a moment of reflection on the part of the spectator, but this does not attend to either the problem of the artist recognising their own complicity or that there might be more than one singular interpretation of masculinity. In both accounts, and as Chapter One suggests, those male artists, through their performance of a generic masculine mask, retain the perception that their identities, and their bodies, are coherent. What this project has uncovered is that to find an alternative way to challenge hegemony I should start with myself, by focusing on my identity and my body. The three works that made up this Practice as Research (PaR) thesis, *Spitting Distance* (2011), *Talking about Keith* (2014), and *Generous Enema* (2016) were created in order to attend to

these areas. In addition to questioning how male artists could challenge normative representations of masculinity without re-inscribing normative traits, behaviours and characteristics into the performance space, these works attempted to answer three other questions. They considered why it was important for me to attend to my personal experiences of having a masculine identity when making body art. Similarly, they were designed to find out how and why my body could be used to challenge normative representations of masculinity. In attempting to answer these questions, I have also sought to reconsider the destabilisation of masculinity through the strategies that emerged from my practice.

### **Unmasking the Gaps**

As noted in Chapter Two, the purpose of looking at myself rather than at a generic masculinity was so that I could identify the gaps that have emerged between my identity and normative expectations of gender. Looking back over this thesis, I can now say that those gaps were created in a number of ways. They were constructed as a result of how my own autobiographical narratives worked against normative definitions of masculine identity, in the unusual pleasures I experienced when focusing on unusual parts of my body, as well the inconsistencies that occurred in the representation of my identity in relation to who I was, who I am now, and how others perceive me. However, gaps are not new concepts in challenging the representations of hegemonic masculine identity, in Chapter One I identified how male artists have demonstrated the gaps between sex and gender as outlined by Amelia Jones (1994 and 1998). Cüneyt Çakırlar (2010), also describes how Gilbert and George expose the

gaps of normative male identity by foregrounding the *objet petit a*, which I described in Chapter One as a male corporeal fear. However, the performances associated with this PaR project did not just aim to expose the gap between my identity and normativity, my aim was to open them up wide and to locate myself in them.

Throughout these performances, I spent much of my time in the in-between spaces, but this thesis proposes that there is something vulnerable in admitting to having holes, in admitting that we are neither here nor there, that we are neither this nor that. In Chapter Two, I explained how vulnerability was marked by the feelings of shame and anxiety, which occurred as a result of bringing other people closer to me, in allowing them to explore my body with me, and in me listening to them and my body. Vulnerability, however, is also marked by ambiguity, and I am reminded of this when through *Generous Enema*, as discussed in Chapter Four, I came to realise that in bringing people closer to my body I was also made to feel more comfortable. I refer to the ambiguity present here, and the gaps that emerge from it, as generosity. This thesis proposes that generosity is more than kindness offered to another, generosity in performance is also a call for others to explore the deep recesses of one's self, to open up the body so as to allow interpretation rather than communication to ensue. The result of which is the manifestation of the unknowable for both artist and participant.

The opening up of my body and self to others occurred in a number of different forms throughout this thesis, it occurred through my writing, and through my practice, it occurred directly on my body and referenced my identity. In Chapter Three, I attempted to achieve generosity in my writing of the

performance experiments, a text that meant to capture the moment where I lost 'myself' as a result of 'me'. In Chapter Two, I discussed how in *Spitting Distance* I opened up the gaps in my identity through the application of Peggy Phelan's (1997) concept of 'affective force'. In *Talking about Keith* I metonymically displaced images, so that the signified replaced other signifiers to create a continuous displacement of signs. I also literally opened up my body in order to open up my identity in *Generous Enema*, where, as I discussed in Chapter Four, I allowed others to explore my corporeality whilst we discussed pleasure together.

The purpose of generosity is not just about opening up gaps for multiplicity to emerge; it is also about the offering up of something more than is expected (Walsh, 2016). From the perspective of the participant, I hoped that this offering would be a discourse about male identity, pleasure and the body, which is something that occurred most explicitly in subsequent discussions that I had about *Spitting Distance*, as I documented in Chapter Two. Although, generosity also provided me with moments of the unexpected, in Chapter Three, I came to realise through *Talking about Keith* that our bodies can produce what I have come to call, with help from Jane Blocker (2004), a somatic language, which challenges the coherence of the symbolic. Through *Generous Enema*, Chapter Four exposed to me that male corporeality is not just about fear and shame, it also about the production of pleasure in unexpected places. In *Spitting Distance*, I was able to come to the conclusion that not all performances that use the abject as a strategy for making can be considered as destabilising.

The point above is an important observation to make, for in this thesis there were many times when generosity and subsequently the unknowable foregrounded my complicity to hegemony rather than my deviance. Like the abject, generosity and the unknowable does not guarantee a destabilisation, for to do so would be to mark what is unknowable as knowable. However, to recognise, but to not attend to this complicity is to also mark it as a problem without rectifying the issue, an approach that I aligned with Vito Acconci's statement about his own practice in Chapter Two. In order to promote change, self-reflexivity was employed, which I now associate with generosity because of its ability to create discourse. In so doing I was able to notice the nuances associated with my own identity, and also action and attend to any problems that were arising. In Chapters Three and Four, self-reflexivity also became an important aspect of the making processes. In *Talking about Keith* I was able to use it as a way of monitoring how particular experiments felt on my body with reference to my relationship to patriarchy. In *Generous Enema* I found myself using self-reflexivity in each performance so that in the gaps between iterations I could make important changes based on my experiences of each participant.

When generosity is discussed, more often than not, it evokes the concept of caregiving, but in this thesis it came to represent a practice of corporeal exploration, self-reflexivity, and the production of gaps. Thus, when generosity is used to destabilise masculinity, it is not about filling up as the phallus does in Lacanian psychoanalysis (see Chapter One), it is about negativity, about taking away and making space in order to allow for more meanings to manifest. There can be no definitive end, for to have one would be to risk fixing. Instead, and as I hope this doctoral project demonstrates, generosity as a tool for destabilisation

is an on-going journey. This is because the new knowledge that emerges from the performances and complementary writing are analogous to me, and my experiences over the last six years. Actually, this thesis is more than this even, it is also born of my experiences previous to the last six years. Indirectly it draws on a young marriage and the subsequent decree nisi that followed two years later, a stupid dare that resulted in a broken jaw, a dislocated wrist, and a fractured arm. It is also the slip of a finger into my anus as a young boy in the bath after football, so I can feel my hard spiky shit just before I desire 'me' to be evacuated from my body. It is all these things, and more.

As a result of being filled with my autobiographical narratives, my identities, and my bodies, the text that you are currently reading is full of inconsistencies. Not just in how, or why, or when I experience things, or even in the moments where you infer something different to what I am implying, but also in the moments when I get things wrong. Those moments particularly where I think I am challenging patriarchy, but instead I am reinforcing it. Rather than allowing my finger to repeatedly hit the backspace over these moments and mask them, it is important that I embrace inconsistency. It is in the act of listening, as noted in Chapter Four, that I am able to open up my body and my identity in order to make change. It is doing these things, in allowing new meanings to form about me, and my understanding of me, that I can create generous environments for change.

**Reconsidering the destabilisation of normative masculinity in male body art.**



It is the acts of generosity that I have outlined in Chapters Two, Three, and Four that have enabled me to reconsider how a destabilisation of normative masculinity might occur in male body art. It is important to note though that whilst Fintan Walsh (2016) explains how generosity in Adrian Howell's work can be described as examples of kindness and caregiving, my experience of it has not always been soft and gentle. Like Dominic Johnson's (2013) discussions on intimacy in Live Art practices, I have come to understand generosity, kindness and caregiving as being more than its definition in common parlance. Just because someone is kind, caring, giving, and light in their touch, does not guarantee that the effect of their generosity is trouble free. Throughout this thesis, both the participant's generosity to me, and my own generosity, has caused trouble, discomfort and anxiety, as well as pleasure, comfort, and excitement.

Two of the most troubling aspects that I have experienced in this thesis were trying to write about *Spitting Distance* and the experiments that informed the work of *Talking about Keith*. At the time of writing up these performances, I assumed that this trouble was based on my fear of how other people might read my identity, which I discussed primarily in Chapter Two. In hindsight, my concern around these performances was more about trying to balance my desire to challenge normativity, whilst at the same time retaining the privilege offered to me as a white, heterosexual, middle-class male. In many respects, what this thesis has taught me is that I cannot do both and that in order to challenge hegemonic representations of masculinity through performance I need to engage with struggle, generosity, and change. By operating within the intersections of these three elements, I produced work that might be considered

as offering something towards a feminist project, in so doing I had to take stock of my identity and displace cultural assumptions about my male body.

### **Struggling Through a Feminist Project**

Much of the work presented by male body artists in this thesis might be considered by some as a feminist challenge to normativity, for as Alice Jardine notes, whether written by a woman or a man, what is necessary for feminist writing is struggle (Jardine, 2002: 58). When reflecting back on this thesis and the performances that form part of it, struggle came in many forms, the struggle with my own identity in Chapter Two, with the incoherence of language systems as explored in Chapter Three, with my relationship to patriarchy, and with my own body as echoed throughout this thesis. The struggle occurs by reconsidering what seems certain, by questioning male relationships to death, scopophilia, fetishism, to the penis, balls, erections, ejaculation, paranoia, blood, tactile pleasures, pleasure in general, and desire (Jardine, 2002: 61). Many of these corporeal aspects emerged in the performances mentioned in Chapter One. Stuart Brisley's character "B" in *180 Hours: Work for Two People* is a performance of paranoia, Gilbert and George consider the relationship between the penis, ejaculation and shit, whilst Ron Athey explores blood, tactile pleasures and desires in general.

This is not to suggest that just because struggle is present that the performance is in and of itself a feminist project. As Stephen Heath notes men should not use feminism as an assurance of their ability to challenge hegemony, one should not be asking whether or not they are right, feminism is about ambiguity (Heath, 2002: 13). It is not statements or answers that are important,

as these have the habit of fixing, rather it is questions that create struggle (Jardine, 2002: 59). When analysing the works of Gilbert and George and Stuart Brisley, it becomes clear that the performance of struggle is not the same as struggle, as to struggle does not just mean to be fearful of. When I struggled over the last six years, I struggled to make sense, to come to terms, to admit, to embrace my body. I struggled with honesty, with my position in the world, with what different things felt like on my body, and whether or not I should go through with particular actions. At times there was very little certainty in what I was doing, I never really knew whether or not my actions would result in a destabilisation of hegemony, despite what I desired.

What I think the difference is between the work that I made and the work of those artists who I define through the trope of muscular masculinity is that I attempted to explore the ambiguity associated with myself and not a generic masculine identity. I attempted to confront, and then embrace, the struggle with my body, my understanding of self, and my relationship with others. When I look back, I can see now that I was attempting to ask myself through those performances, “What am I hiding?”; “What am I not talking about?”; “What am I assuming about myself, my body, and my being in the world?” This is why in Chapter Four, I reconsidered the role of autobiography in my work, and in turn revisited Ron Athey’s performances. It is not that I do not necessarily think his work is not indicative of muscular masculinity, but through his autobiographical material and struggle, I have also come to recognise that he also generously opens himself to exploration.

Having said this, struggle also emerged for me not only in the relationship to my body and self but also in the recognition that in some

respects I have to demonstrate change. It is not good enough to just recognise a problem, as Chapter Two notes, it feels necessary to adapt the way in which I live my life, and thus the ways in which I understand my body. The utilisation of a self-reflexive approach presented me with the stark realisation that in order to keep myself 'safe', to retain the privileges associated with patriarchy, others would always to be impacted negatively. Instead, and as Chapter Four revealed to me through *Generous Enema*, it became necessary to publically embrace both my abject self and my body in performance, in order to destabilise hegemonic representations of masculinity. To embrace these causes struggle, but it is only by demonstrating to others that there is the possibility for change that change might happen. Moreover, it is only through the presentation of change in performance that male body art can destabilise hegemonic representations of masculinity and patriarchy.

### **Taking Stock of Struggle**

Self-reflexivity and change could only take place throughout this PaR doctoral project by undertaking a process of taking stock of myself. By that I mean, in order for change to occur I had to take time to find out about myself, to listen to my body, and to locate these moments alongside others. Those others might be the spectators and participants that took time to be with me in the three performances spoken about in the previous pages of this thesis, or they might have been the scholars that I have used to unpack my experiences. Alternatively, 'others' might refer to you, the person reading my writing right now, a person thus complicit in the making and adaptation of my identity. Or they might be those people who I referred to in Chapter Two, those people who I

was concerned about not upsetting what I thought their understanding of me was, my family, my girlfriend, and my work colleagues for example.

This thesis is full of moments where I have taken stock of myself, and as such, I like to think of it as a type of self-writing. Michel Foucault referred to this practice as the *hupomnemata*, which refers to the ancient Greek practice of writing where the author collected reflections and reasoning that one had heard or that had come to mind. The purpose of these texts was that they were to be read from time to time so that the contents could become concrete (Foucault, 1997: 209). This thesis might be seen in a similar vein, for it is also a collection of my own experiences, my thoughts about masculinity, and my reflections. This is meant not only in the words written on the page, but through the performances themselves that also function as examples of writings that contain memories and reflections on my identity and my experiences of my body. To perform the essence of these memories and to reflect on my feelings and experiences associated with these performances is to remind myself as to what my identity and body really are; to reconsider them outside of a culturally constructed context; to see myself as fluid, permeable, fragmented and fragile.

The struggles as a result of participating in self writing are an important aspect of challenging hegemony through body art. As I noted above, part of experiencing struggle is the process of highlighting my relationship to patriarchal discourse. Throughout this thesis, I have seen this work in three ways; in the first instance, and as was discussed in Chapter Two, a process of self-writing highlighted normative masculine characteristics, behaviours and traits in my identity, even if when I thought I was not be acting in this way. Secondly, struggle emerged by attending to issues that I would have preferred

to keep suppressed, as demonstrated in Chapter Three through my reflections on *Talking about Keith*. Finally, struggle can come through my recognition that I am constantly demarcating my understanding of self and in turn my identity. This is a concept that cannot be pinned down to any one performance or chapter, but rather it emerged only through a process of self-reflection, of auditing what I have done, how I did it, and marking how it made me feel.

In Chapter Four, I described how Ron Athey performed the deject because he was in a constant process of demarcating his self by generously opening up his body and identity through performance. In *Powers of Horror* (1982) Julia Kristeva suggests that the deject is a deliberate choice one where the subject deliberately ejects himself from the symbolic system that defines his identity. Yet from my experiences of performing the three works associated with this thesis, and undertaking a process of self-writing, I propose now that this is not necessarily the case. Demarcation does happen in multiple ways, but not always as a result of deliberate decision on the part of the subject. We demarcate our boundaries over time, and as this thesis demonstrates, my identity has significantly changed over the space of six years and will continue to change in the years to come. Even between chapters, the way in which I seem to define myself seems to change, through chapters Two to Four I have become less anxious about the male body, more aware of my being in the world, and more accepting of difference. Yet demarcation does not stop there, for it also occurs through the intersubjective, in the different ways in which multiple people help to construct my understanding of self, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

Thus, the importance of an artist focusing on their self is located in their ability to demonstrate and recognise their own masculine identity as not fixed. All identities are fluid, not just because social expectations around gender change, or because we can never achieve the blueprints of normativity, both of which I identified in Chapter One. Our own identities are fluid because our understanding of self is in constant flux; the person who I was at the beginning of this project is not the person who is currently writing this conclusion, or even the person that I'll be tomorrow. My understanding of self changes as a result of the people I interact with, it also changes because I have desired different things at different points in my life, I mean this with regards to my corporeal pleasures, but also the politics that I currently hold, compared to those ideologies which I used to believe in. As I come to the end of this project, I have come to realise that I have attempted to hide these inconsistencies and gaps in the past by not discussing them in public. However, what this project has taught me is that I need to generously unmask these gaps in performance through a process of self-writing, in order to demonstrate myself as unknowable.

### **Struggling with male embodiment.**

One way in which I attempted to generously unmask the gaps of my identity through self-writing was to use my body, or more specifically, to focus on my embodiment as a male subject. In Chapter Two, I achieved this by exploring the mouth and spittle through *Spitting Distance*, in Chapter Three, the penis and semen as a productive discharge in *Talking about Keith*, and in Chapter Four through *Generous Enema*, the anus was offered as a site for exploration to the participants. The reasons why my body was used in this way was because, and as Chapter Four explains, they helped to expose and brush

aside the symbolic representations of my gendered identity. It was this metaphorical act of exposing and brushing away, of excavating, that my leaky body was revealed to me, along with my experiences and feelings of it. Furthermore, by exploring the terrain of my body through the process of explication, I was also able to recognise and reflect upon myself as abject, that my identity, gendered or otherwise, can never be autonomous. Rather than being a fixed coherent system, I became aware of being permeable, full of holes that allowed others in to make their own meaning of me; importantly, though this process, I came to see my body as a metonymical reference point for my identity.

In Chapter One, I argued that muscular masculinity, whilst presenting the male body as abject, also demonstrates the male artist as being coherent and strong as they seemed to be able to withstand the *powers of horror* associated with the abject. In effect, they presented the leakiness and penetrability of embodiment onto other male bodies, an act that resonates with Calvin Thomas' (2006) point that embodiment is always displaced onto the Other. To be permeable means to be penetrable and in turn vulnerable, for male subjectivity, to cover up holes means that male embodiment can be culturally ignored, and allow for the impossibly hard, and controlling, male body to be intimately entwined with normativity. In contrast to this position, I propose in this thesis that through explication, my identity and fluid corporeality are intimately woven together to create an embodied experience of my being in the world and my identity, which otherwise would have remained unknowable to me.

In all three of the performances associated with this thesis, my experiences of my male body have acted as a reminder that we are all



embodied subjects, that we are composite and ambiguous beings. This is an important observation to make for it highlights our inability to have complete control over our bodies, something which in Chapter One I identified as being a key characteristic in patriarchal definitions of masculinity. The result of recognising the uncontrollable male body in performance is that it might cause shame anxiety, as noted in Chapters Two and Three, as the male subject negotiates the construction of his relationship in relation to those people around him who might embrace the normative construction of male corporeality. However, as Chapters Three and Four noted, these are not the only feelings that are present, for male embodiment produces multiple feelings that do not manifest separately, but rather overlap each other to create a complex understanding of one's self that is both contradictory and coherent.

The complexity of male embodiment is able to challenge patriarchal representations of masculine identity because it reconsiders the fixed relationship between the male body and normative masculinity. In explicating his body, the male artist actively highlights himself as deject, as somebody that attempts to demarcate by excluding their self from the symbolic system of patriarchy. In Chapters Two and Four this was demonstrable through *Spitting Distance* and *Generous Enema* where the opening up of my body to the participant also resulted in the opening up my identity. In Chapter Three, this was demonstrated in a slightly different way, when I resisted incorporating the experiments into the final performance because of my concern of 'becoming someone else'.

This thesis proposes that in experiencing the abject male body in this form, the male artist must also experience struggle. Certainly, I mean this in the

way that my own body caused me embarrassment, shame, and anxiety in Chapter Two, as to experience these emotions emphasises one's ability to move away from the security of patriarchy. However, as I noted in Chapter Three, to only assume that the male body brings shame and anxiety reasserts a binary where masculinity and the male body are not compatible. By struggle then I do not only mean to imply an emotional turmoil associated with having an abject male body, I also mean to give value to the way that the body resists sense or coherence. This was something I noted in Chapter Three where, through an analysis of Julia Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984), my body was used as part of a language system that was fundamental to challenging the symbolic; it was this that I referred to as being somatic language.

However, the resistance to sense and coherence can also come through the contradictions that emerge through the subject's experiences of their body, for as Chapter Four has demonstrated, as well as negative feelings the male body can also manifest feelings of pleasure. This can relate to corporeal pleasures that have remained unexcavated due to patriarchal narratives and identity texts, alternatively, pleasure can also come from the close physical proximity of being with other people, in allowing others to experience your body with you, a practice that makes these hidden pleasures public. The production of the unknowable destabilises patriarchal descriptions through the overlapping of different feelings, the simultaneous experience of pleasure and anxiety. This is achieved because feelings and emotions can appear and disappear depending on the individuals that one is with. The manifesting of different emotions, feelings and experiences highlight for me not only the ambiguity of the male body but also how one is reliant on the interactions of others in order

to experience and understand One's being in the world, which was discussed in Chapter Two. It is for this reason that this thesis proposes that the male body can be used to challenge patriarchy through the exploration of embodiment, and not just the materiality of male corporeality. It is the experience and presentation in performance of contradictions, ambiguities and the unknowable qualities of what it is to have a male body, that makes explicit the incoherence, fluidity and fragmentation of masculine identity.

## **Considerations for Future Research**

I argue in this thesis that the struggle with one's body, identity, and the unknowability that emerges from these can be seen as an alternative challenge to the re-inscription of normative masculine characteristics, behaviours and traits for male artists. Rather than attempting to mark the gaps associated with a generic masculinity and its relation to normalcy, generosity in performance, which as I have implied above allows for struggle to manifest, is not concerned with defining or outlining what is or is not masculinity. By opening up gaps in the male body and identity, the artist encourages others to construct that identity with him, so that together what is unknowable might emerge in order to reveal masculinity as a set of ambiguous and fluid performative texts. Instead, the focus of struggle places emphasis on a more ethical challenge to normativity by moving away from the distant and objective position of performing masculine shame and anxiety. In allowing for periods of self-reflexivity, generosity in performance requires the male artist to recognise to his own being in the world and attend to how his actions affect others around him.

However, in recognising the struggle that generosity offers me some questions also emerge, which highlight the limitations of this doctoral project. If, for example, generosity highlights the shame and anxiety associated with my experiences in performance, but also unashamedly embraces these, as I did in *Generous Enema*, could generosity be read through a Queer lens? This question is brought into sharp relief for me when considering Sue Ellen-Case's position on the concept of Queer, which feels vampiric as a result of consisting of the abject and the transgression of boundary's between proper and improper (Case, 1991: 3). As Sullivan notes though, to leave Queer here is to not see it as a verb, a process of quizzing, spoiling and ridiculing (Sullivan, 2001: 52). With this in mind, I am left wondering what really is the relationship between Queer Theory, generosity, and my own practice? Whilst I do not see direct references to Queer in *Spitting Distance*, or *Talking about Keith*, the way I write about these works particularly suggests that there might be, at the very least, a Queer trajectory to consider.

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## **Appendices**

## Appendix A: Photographic Documentation of Spitting Distance

Photography by Bobby Whitaker

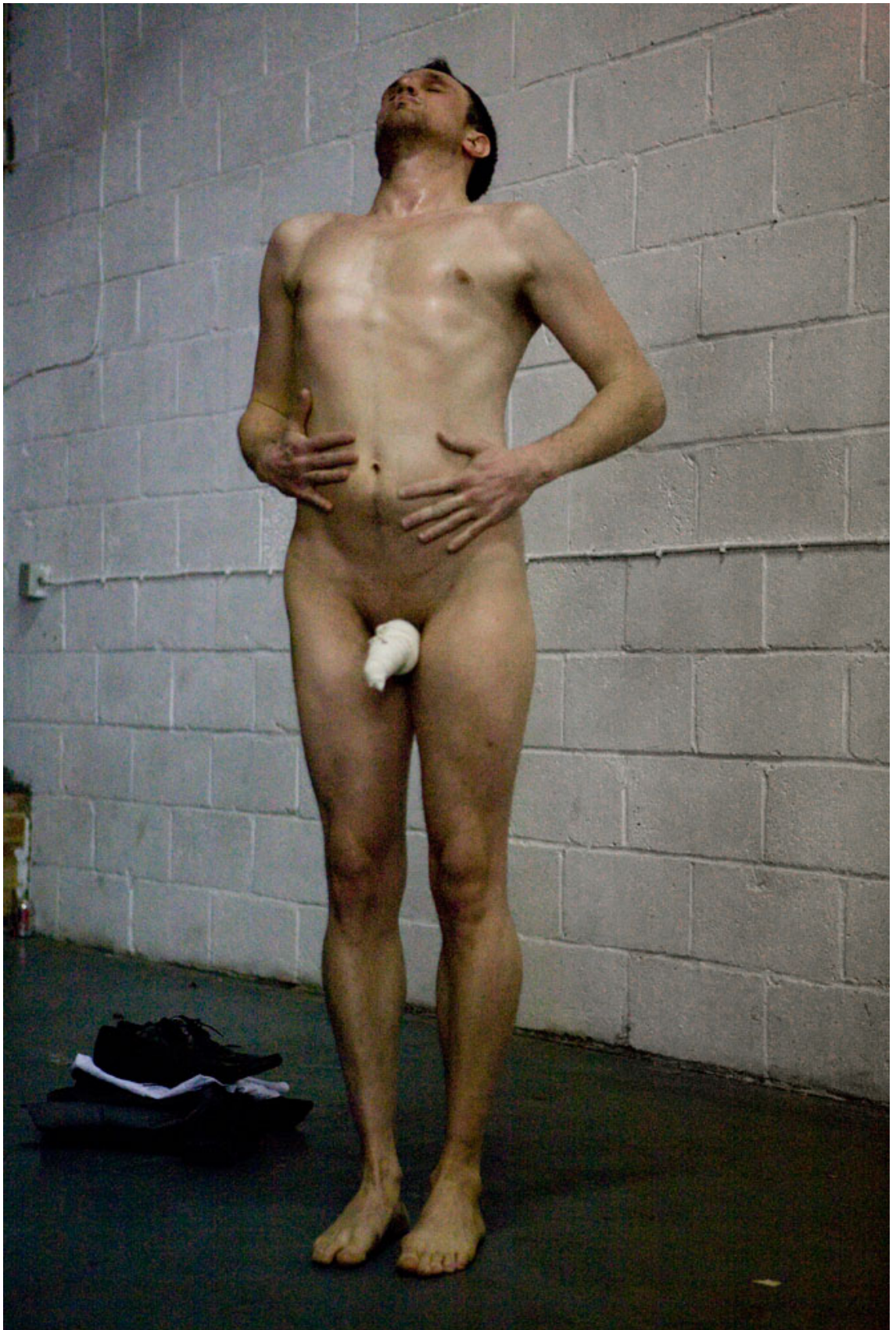








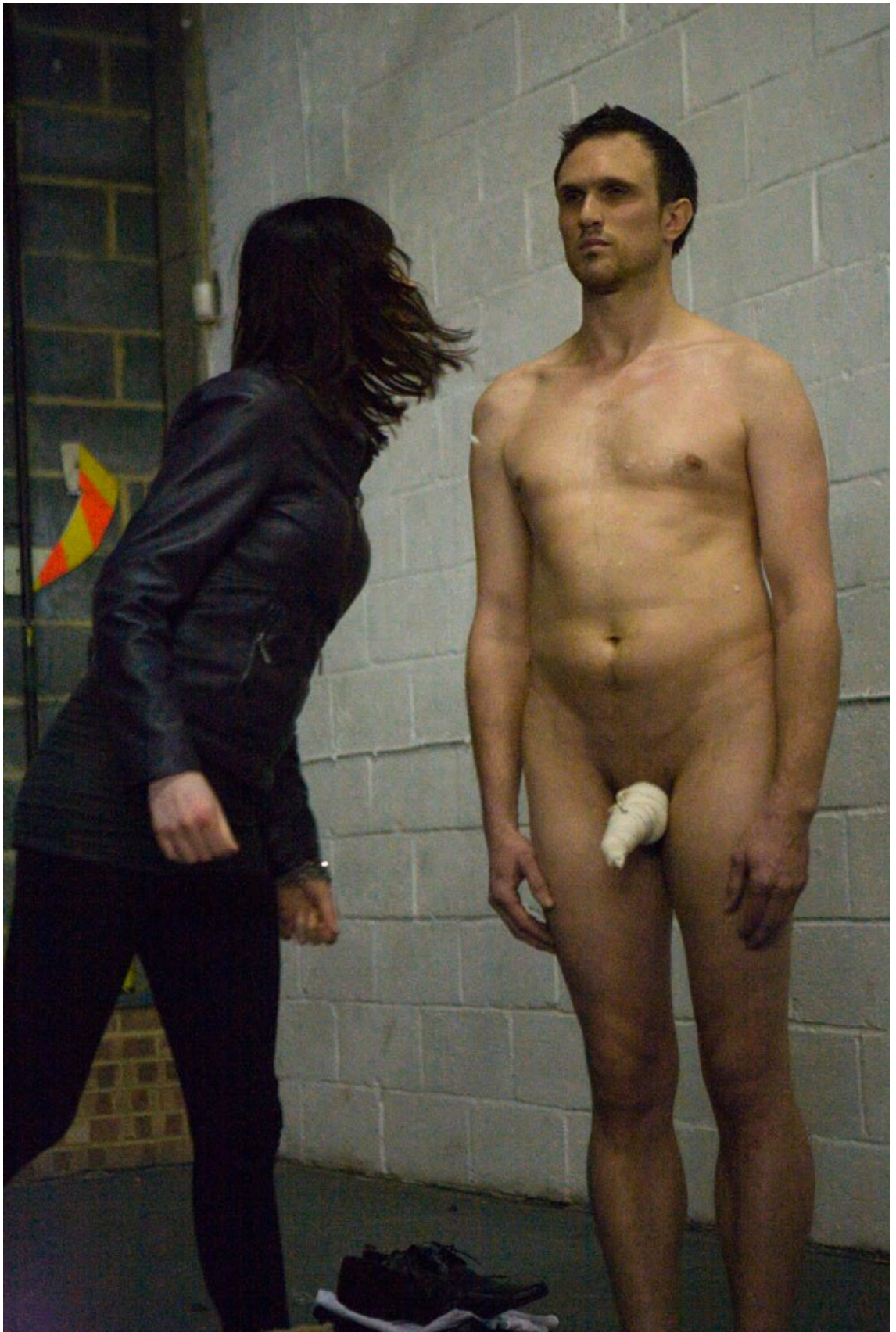
























## **Appendix B: Example Transcript of Performance Experiment**

**Exploring Semen: Week 1 – Friday 25th January 2013**

**LENGTH of VIDEOED REHEARSAL: 26 Minutes**

**AIM of session and its mapping to the overall aims of Semen Project:**

1. *To find out why semen is not a threat to sexual identity (1)*
2. *To explore how it might be used in performance (2)*

**QUESTIONS associated with session and their mapping to aims of the this sessions AIMS**

1. *What is my own relationship with semen and why might I have this relationship with it? (1)*
2. *Why is its abject qualities ignored and how can this be undermined in body based practices? (1, 2)*
3. *What can I actually do with my semen and what specific affects does it have on my body? (2)*
4. *Why are these affects important in undermining the construction of visual representation? (2)*

### **RESULTS**

1. *When the sperm sample was taken, it separated into a seminal fluid and sperm.*
2. *Sperm sample to be taking on a Tuesday and a Friday, which will also be documented – there will be no masturbation on a Wednesday and Thursday so that I can collect as much sperm on these days as possible.*
3. *What is the difference between menstrual blood and sperm is different?*
4. *I want to look at its making capacity – or its ability to father, claim pleasure and its reference to the seed. This leads me onto ask what is the relationship between seminal and semen, in that both refer to the importance of seed, and I if this has anything to do with the valorising of the penis? The obvious difference is that menstrual blood seeps and sperm is controlled and maybe it is the combination of the above that allows for men to displace sperm as abject.*
5. *So how can my body seep?*
6. *Was disappointed that I only produced a couple of ml, for men, or at least me, the amount of sperm produced seems to reference a type of commodity. Why was I underwhelmed about the quantity – maybe this has something to do with pornography? Virility? Or more importantly is the amount generated a reflection on a) how manly you are b) how much the penis is valorised? – Also it has a lack of mass.*
7. *Tried painting with sperm, but this was shit. I wanted to expose it as a maker of art which referenced its seminal roots. However, the sperm didn't do anything interesting and was fairly difficult to use in a painting capacity. This is ironic in relation to sperm in its making capacity.*

8. *In the rehearsal process I am reminded of a memory I have:*
  - i. *I associate semen with being eighteen. At the time I was in, at least what I now view as, my first relationship, we were together for a-year-and-a-half before both of us went to University. I remember us both having very strict parents and so our sexual activities were located in a car park late at night just opposite her house. One night, after dropping her off, she asked me whether or not I knew what a pearl necklace was. My response was enough encouragement for her to demonstrate it to me. She placed my penis between her breasts and stimulated me. After ejaculating, she pointed to her neck and said that is a pearl necklace.*
9. *I am not particularly proud of this memory, looking back to that moment I feel quite uncomfortable with what happened. However, I think this is interesting in light of Elizabeth Grosz' (1994) articulation of sperm in pornography as an indexing of her (the actress) pleasure. Whilst I do not assume my memory to be pornographic (although there needs to be some major unpacking of this statement), I am led to consider what pleasure comes from the receiving of sperm onto the body? I wonder what the wearing of sperm means with regards to abjection? The concept of a necklace suggests a gift or a commodity, something more than just a fluid, but could there be some reference to the concept of a shackle? The relationship between pearl and sperm, despite both having pearlescent qualities, also gives a value to the product of the penis, but is there another reading that can be less valorising?*
10. *I really want to recreate this thing called a pearl necklace. In my memory it was a request, which feels weird, which means the ejaculation on to her neck becomes a gift. Something that is desired and then received. This works against what I understand about sperm in pornography which is used as a marker for the pleasure of the female, for the male spectator.*
11. *I'm thinking about freezing the sperm to make a pearl necklace – what has this got to do with the freezing of sperm in cryogenics?*
12. *It had a great texture when it was being pulled out of the sample pot by the brush. It was stringy, and gooey and smelt. Although I was surprised that its smell reminded me of chlorine. There's something really interesting for me in that relationship, on the one it is abject – everything about it should be formless. On the other hand its smell has a cleaning property to it.*
13. *I tasted the sperm on the brush, by pressing the tip of my tongue onto it and it didn't taste of anything. I decided to drink it, but even in those preparatory seconds you can see on my face that this is not something I really want to do. I remember seeing it slowly coming towards my lips. I felt really uncomfortable in doing that. I won't be doing this again. Two minutes later, in the process of a separate action (I gave myself a facial), my body reacted. I think this corporeal response, the gagging, was to do with the consumption of sperm rather than painting it onto my face. This suggests that the corporeal flow of sperm is only acceptable on its way out of the body.*
14. *Sperm is almost invisible – difficult to see - it's interesting because it's almost (not) capacity (object, liquid, transparent) suggests abject, but also it does disappear on skin.*



## **CONCLUSION**

When I think about sperm as a borderline fluid I recognise its abject status because it is abjected from the body, because it is formless, it sits at the borders of life and it dies. However, I never found my own semen abject or repulsive, unless it was revealed socially on my clothes, or being caught masturbating. Maybe this has something to do with the idea that the man finds the wastage of sperm abject. In that if you are caught masturbating you are caught ejecting sperm for no reason. So it's not the engagement of sex that is problematic, or even pornography – sperm is a marker of her pleasure, but rather that the sperm is just left to die and not mark anything. Using the body as a social metaphor, the [r]ejection of sperm through masturbation, might be a rejection of maleness. In this capacity sperm is a valuable product.

Conversely I have also found my sperm in this rehearsal abject because it came towards me instead of flowing away from me. I swallowed it instead of pushing it away. Sperm seems to be not abject when it is going away from the body, but once it is reversed it becomes that slippery, sticky, formless, thing that does literally cross the boundary between “I” and “Not-I”. The sperm is actually me, and when I think about the result of my sperm after it fertilises, it becomes clear that I am eating and then ejecting again a potential me. I think this is greater than Kristeva's “I expel myself” because I am simultaneously expelling and consuming “myself” and other.

## **NEW QUESTIONS**

What were the benefits of a Pearl Necklace to two teenagers?

Was this a type of acceptance to patriarchy on both of our parts? Or was there a type of sacrificing of my body (sperm being part of my body)?

What happens if I create my own pearl necklace? Would this mean that somehow sperm would threaten me?

What is the relationship between sperm, masculinity and the genius of the artist in modernist performance practices?

Does this invisibility of sperm on skin, compared to the visibility of menstrual blood, suggest a relationship or metaphor between sperm and the un-analysable male as spoken about by Grosz (2004)?

Why did Acconci hide his sperm in Seed Bed?

### **RESEARCH**

The concept of a necklace

Semen and cryogenics

Pornography and the relationship to semen

## Appendix C: Documentation

### Performance Score for *Spitting Distance* (Tempting Failure)

*A Performance for Fifteen Minutes suitable for performance studio*

1. Audience stood round performance space. Just off centre is a three-piece suit folded neatly on top of a pair of shoes. On top of the suit are two bandages and a safety pin.
2. Enter through audience naked and stand next to clothes.
3. Pull at penis, make it longer, till it hurts.
4. Whilst stretching penis bind it with the two bandages whilst trying to extend the bandages past the penis' limit to suggest an erection.
5. Pin the bandages in place.
6. Tighten your body to look like a penis.
7. Keep repeating this until your body hurts.
8. Tighten your body one more time, look up into the air and try to spit on your face – keep this going for 260 seconds.
9. Finish.
10. Spit into your hands and then walk towards the audience and offer them the opportunity to spit as well.
11. Go back to performance space – lift up spit and rub it down your face, neck, body and then penis in one fluid movement.
12. Straighten up and pretend to be a penis once more until it hurts.
13. Stop.
14. Look at the audience and say "Please enter, spit and make your Mark"
  - a. Keep repeating this until everyone has spat at your body or until no one else comes in.
15. Undo bandage.
16. Get changed into the suit.
17. Become a penis again and allow the spit to seep through the clothes.
18. Leave the space.

## Performance Score for *Talking about Keith*

1. *Imagine a catwalk – at one end there is a small wooden stool, at the other nothing. Along the end of the catwalk there are five 5L bottles of water with five 1kg bags of salt next to them.*
2. *Sit on wooden tool, stand up, pull pants and trousers around ankles and then pour water and salt onto the chair.*
3. *Move to the side of the chair, make a fist with your left hand, and push your index finger through your left fist.*
4. *Carefully touch the salty water with the tip of your tongue*
5. *Lick the full length of the stool.*
6. *Push your finger through your fist so it touches the wooden stool, which is covered in water and salt.*
7. *Pull your bum cheeks apart and sit back down on the chair, with your pants around your ankles.*
8. *Squeeze your bum cheeks together.*
9. *Stand up and pour one Kg of salt in to your mouth, allow it to overflow.*
10. *Bend down and pick up a 5L bottle of water and pour the contents into your mouth. Allow it to overflow.*
11. *Repeat above five times.*
12. *Go to the end of the catwalk where the stool is. Face the stool, get onto your hands and knees, and push all of the salt into the middle of the catwalk.*
13. *Repeat above from the other end.*
14. *Pick the salt up and roll your penis in it, start masturbating.*
15. *Pull all the salt back together again into a pile.*
16. *Pick up the salt and make a necklace.*
17. *Drag the salt back together again and make a pile.*
18. *Pick up the salt and role it into a ball, bend over, with your bottom facing the spectators, and stick/rub this ball into your sphincter.*
19. *Sit back down on the wooden stool, and thank your audience.*

## Performance Score for *Generous Enema*

Photography stills from Videoed Performance

### **A One-to-One Performance that lasts for approximately half an hour.**

1. *The performance takes place in two cubicles in the gent's toilets – the divide has been removed.*
2. *In a cubicle, with the door open, I sit on a toilet with my trousers and pants around my ankles. On the floor there is an enema kit, a jug of water, some rubber gloves, and a bin.*
- 3.



4.



5. *I outline that at any point, if they wish to stop the performance, leave, or just watch, to let me know. I remind them that whatever they decide is all fine.*
6. *I breathe deeply, hold and release 16 times - on the 16th I falter.*
7. *I tell them about how I enjoy holding off going to the toilet for as long as possible.*
8. *I ask the participant if they would help.*
- 9.



10. *I take their hand and guide them beside me.*
11. *I hand them a bottle of water and I pick up the enema can.*
12. *I pass them the enema tip and I hold the tube to indicate that they should connect the two.*



13. *I release the fluid a little.*

14. *I take the enema can and put it beside me.*

15. *I take their hand and place their finger into the Vaseline.*

16.



17.



18. *Once the enema is finished I put on the clamp and wait for thirty seconds.*

19.



20.



21. *I lay on my right side.*

22. *I move back onto my front, remove the enema tube and pull up my trousers.*

23. *I take the gloves of the participant and bin them.*

24. *I remove the enema tip and place it into the bin.*

25. *I pour the remaining water in the enema can down the toilet.*

26. *I tell the story of not making it.*



27.



28. *I thank the participant for their help.*

## **Appendix D: Video Documentation**

### **DVD 1: *Spitting Distance* (2011–2012)**

Performances from both *University of Plymouth* (2011) and *Tempting Failure* (2012) are on back page of thesis.

### **DVD 2: *Talking about Keith* (2014)**

Both male and female performances, and selected performance documentation from the experiments are on the back page of this thesis.